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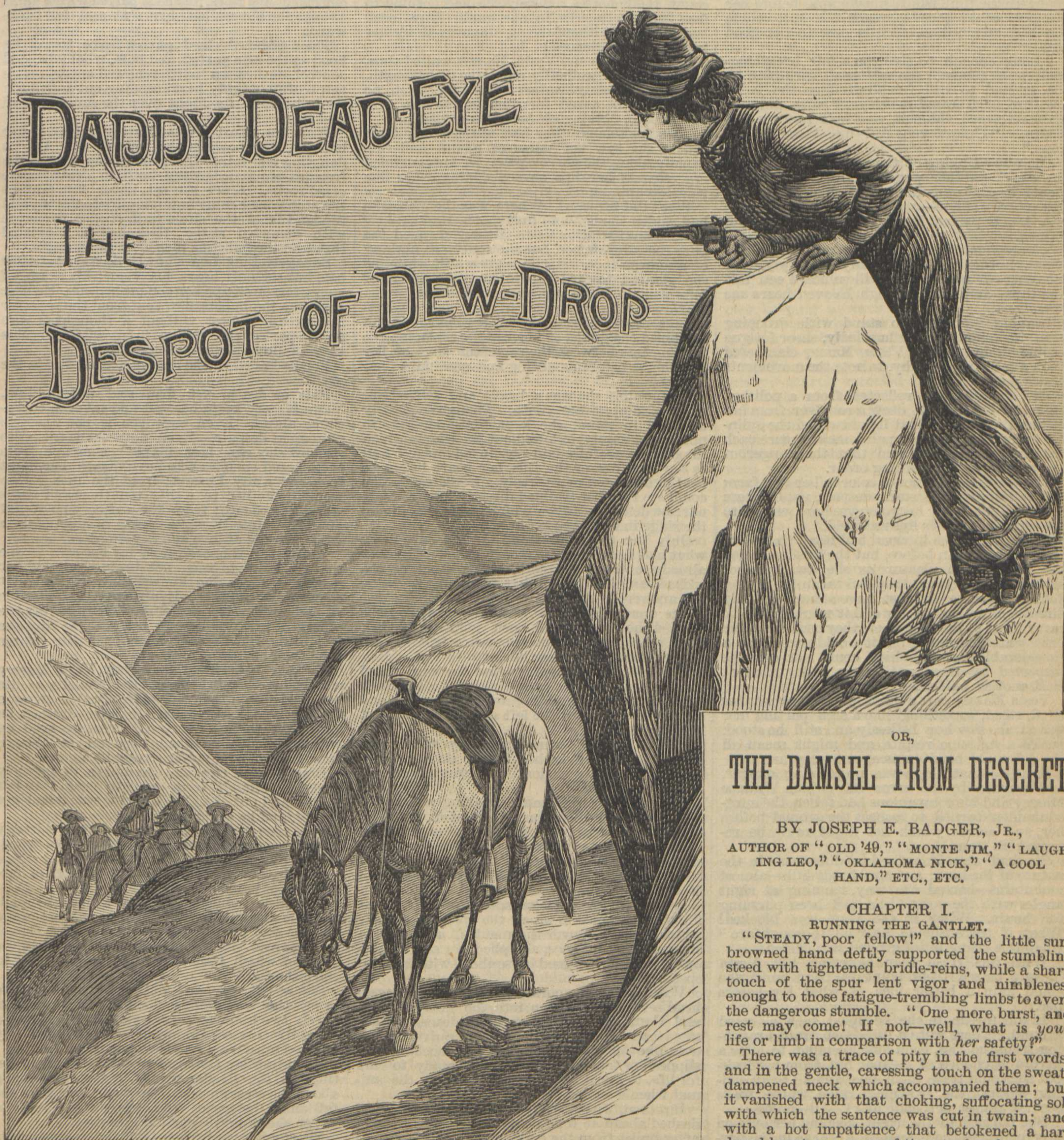
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LEAVING HER STEED TO STAND WITH DROOPING HEAD, VESTA MASSEY CLAMBERED UPON A TALL ROCK HARD BY, TO NOTE THE MOVEMENTS OF HER PURSUERS.

OR, THE DAMSEL FROM DESERET.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,
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ING LEO," "OKLAHOMA NICK," "A COOL
HAND," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

RUNNING THE GANTLET.

"STEADY, poor fellow!" and the little sun-browned hand deftly supported the stumbling steed with tightened bridle-reins, while a sharp touch of the spur lent vigor and nimbleness enough to those fatigue-trembling limbs to avert the dangerous stumble. "One more burst, and rest may come! If not—well, what is your life or limb in comparison with her safety?"

There was a trace of pity in the first words, and in the gentle, caressing touch on the sweat-dampened neck which accompanied them; but it vanished with that choking, suffocating sob with which the sentence was cut in twain; and with a hot impatience that betokened a hardened heart or a sense of threatening danger far too imminent to leave room for considering the comfort of a brute beast, Vesta Massey urged

her good horse on with voice and spur until the steep ascent was accomplished, and her backward glance could take in a wide expanse of country.

Rugged and wild in the extreme was this; great masses of rocks, hardly relieved by the scattering trees and stunted shrubbery; crags and pinnacles, defiles and gulches, some running parallel with each other, while here and there one cut sharply across the rest almost at right angles.

But Vesta Massey had no eyes for these wild features. Her dark eyes, filled with a mixture of hope and fear, of trust that was doing desperate battle with doubt, roved swiftly across these rugged features in the effort to trace her winding course and learn the whole truth, be that for good or evil.

The solution came all too soon for her peace of mind.

Nearer even than when she had seen them last, her pursuers came in sight, following her trail as surely as though gifted with the powers of a sleuth-hound! And as she crouched in her saddle, the faint flush fading from her cheeks and a low sob rising in her parched throat, she caught sight of a gesture made by the horseman in the lead.

That gesture told her how little she had to hope for in case she should fall again into his power, and it lent her the courage she so sorely stood in need of. With a proud, almost fierce motion she drew erect, her glowing eyes critically scanning the ground which lay between them, counting the time which must elapse before her pursuers could hope to reach the spot which she had attained at such a cost to her good steed.

"Long enough to give you a fair breathing-spell, poor fellow!" she muttered, springing to the ground to still further relieve the jaded creature. "The end is not yet!" with a quick glance toward the sun, now well past the meridian. "Unless you fail me, there is still hope!"

She was thinking of the coming of night. If she could foil her pursuers until then, escape would be almost assured in such a wild, trackless waste. If not—

A laugh parted her lips as her dark eyes flashed.

"Your triumph will be only partial, Wallace Massey! One victim is already lost to you, and the other—if nothing less will suffice, I can foil you thus—and I will, as high Heaven hears me now!"

Leaving her steed to stand with drooping head, its flanks heaving hurriedly, sheer fatigue visible in every line, Vesta Massey clambered upon a tall rock hard by, to note the movements of her pursuers.

The sunlight was reflected from a polished barrel as the maiden drew a revolver from her belt and with practiced hand twirled the cylinder around on her soft palm, making sure each chamber was loaded, and that the dangerous toy was in perfect working order.

There was not a trace of color in her fair face; it was the pallor of stern despair, not of fear; and the light in her lustrous eyes bore witness to the terrible vow her lips recorded.

Brief though the interval had been, they were much nearer than before, but the maiden curled her lip in grim pleasure as she saw, from her elevated lookout, that they had taken the wrong defile. To them it must have seemed the only direct course, and in the end it would suffice to carry them to the spot where they could see their prize watching them; but it would necessitate a considerable detour, which could not even be suspected by them until they had gained at least another half-mile.

Vesta Massey cast a quick glance toward her tired steed, something like a sigh parting her lips as she saw how listlessly and still he stood. It was a welcome respite, and might mean all the difference between escape and capture.

Satisfied that there was no pressing danger, and warned by the error into which Wallace Massey and his companions had fallen, the hunted maiden turned to inspect the ground before her, and across which her flight must be reversed ere long.

She had already noticed a difference in the nature of the land; a chain of ugly hills—almost mountains—barred the way, running at right angles with the course she had been pursuing for hours. What if the way was blocked? What if there should be "no thoroughfare" when this rising bit of ground was passed?

With this fresh fear haunting her, Vesta Massey passed from point to point until she could gain a better idea of what lay before her.

It was fortunate she occupied such elevated ground. There were a full dozen trails branching from the rise, each one seeming to offer a favorable chance of escape; but from her lookout she could trace them one and all to an ending against the frowning ridge whose walls seemed almost perpendicular! All—unless—

She hurried to the right, keeping her eyes on a point where there seemed a curve in the barrier, with a trail leading direct to it from where her jaded horse stood. And then, with a sobbing note of intense relief, she murmured:

"I am almost sure of it! There is a pass through the hills!"

Stifling her glad emotions for the time being, Vesta Massey carefully marked the point, noting each feature of the trail which she must follow in order to reach that one chance of escape. Then, turning back to her first lookout, she searched for her enemies once more.

Another surprise awaited her. The party had halted, and were on foot! Had their animals given out, or had they just discovered their mistake, and were endeavoring to rectify it?

"No matter!" with the ghost of a smile. "It is time gained, and that is all precious just now! Let night come, and it will go hard but I give you the slip, Wallace Massey! Let night come, and you may look for your fourth bride elsewhere, Eli Prosser!"

She knew that her tall, lithe figure must be plainly visible against the sky, from where Wallace Massey and his evil tools from the nest of polygamy rested, but she cared naught for that.

"Better so, maybe," she murmured. "If they think me penned in; if they think my further flight is barred; they will take more time to pick their way. And all I ask is delay enough to bring night. All I ask is to keep out of your evil clutches until darkness comes!"

Her hopes seemed in a fair way to be granted. Her pursuers apparently were content to take their time so long as she afforded them occasional glimpses of her figure on the high crags, and she was not uneasy as long as she could count their horses. Surely she had nothing to fear from footmen? No one could draw near her position without being discovered by her keenly-roving glances.

For full two hours Vesta Massey waited thus, her good horse gradually regaining its strength. If there was only water within its reach, no more could be asked for; but far as her eyes could roam, nothing of the sort was visible.

Then, as though they had studied out their course, she saw her pursuers mount and ride rapidly along the narrow pass. A low, troubled cry escaped her lips as she distinguished one riderless animal.

What did it mean? Where was the man who had ridden the horse to that spot? Had he—

With anxious eyes Vesta Massey scanned the bare rocks below her, but she could see nothing of a man on foot. Her face grew still whiter as she glanced toward the intersecting range of hills ahead. It did not seem possible, and yet—there was a haunting fear tugging at her heart-strings as she sprang from her lookout and tightened the girths of her saddle, replacing the jingling bits between the reluctant jaws of her good horse before mounting and continuing her flight.

Fortunately she was a brave and self-reliant woman, despite her youth. Though so greatly troubled in mind, she kept the landmarks in mind, and surely followed out the course which she had so carefully laid out in advance. And as she drew nearer the hills, her heart began to beat lighter and more freely. For already she could see that her trail led directly into a deep, narrow defile or canyon which seemed to divide the ridge in equal parts.

Only for that led horse! If she only knew what had become of its recent rider! She had already entered the pass, losing sight of the rocks behind her, when that troubling question was answered.

The pass was almost straight, now, and she fancied she could detect open country beyond, when a hoarse cry came to her ears from in advance and high over her head.

"Halt, thar, little gal!" came the words, and thus guided, her eyes caught sight of a tall, lank figure hastily scrambling over the rocks and clefts which marked the left side of the pass, yet high overhead.

"Link Loper!" came gaspingly as she mechanically reined in her horse, staring wild-eyed at the ugly vision. "It was *his* horse I saw being led by—"

"Jig's up, honey!" came mockingly from the fellow as he steadied himself in a cleft, bringing his rifle forward with a threatening air, as he added: "Hate to talk that way, Miss Vesty, but ef you try to run through, I've got to stop ye—*livin' or dead!* It's the boss's say-so, mind ye, Miss Vesty!"

It proved an unlucky speech—that hint at flight. It seemed to break the spell of despair which had fallen over the maiden, and with a sharp cry of defiance, she plied her spur vigorously, sending her good horse ahead with frenzied speed.

With a savage curse, the lank ruffian overhead sent a bullet down into the narrow pass, and Vesta gave a choking cry of despair as her steed gave a spasmodic bound, quivering all over like one in death-agony! She mechanically slipped her foot from the stirrup, ready to leap for life, to avoid being caught beneath the animal when it should fall.

But then, with a wild scream of pain, the steed dashed ahead at top speed, followed by bullet after bullet from the cursing ruffian above!

On at desperate speed, despite the trail of life-blood which he was laying at each bound. On, in spite of the lead spat forth by the rapidly-

worked repeating rifle. On, with the glancing bullets screaming viciously as they came in swift succession. Still on, running the gantlet which could end only in death!

CHAPTER II.

BEAUTY AT BAY.

For the first few moments after that dread discovery, Vesta Massey was conscious of only one thought: that of flight, even though the effort must end in death.

In recognizing Link Loper, she knew that in flying in the face of his stern warning she was taking her life in her own hand. She knew that he would carry out any orders received from Wallace Massey, regardless of consequences. She knew that he would shoot, as his actions threatened; but even the fear of death was less powerful than the horror of capture.

Instinct told her that her poor steed was hard hit, and she expected an instant failure. For this she freed her foot from the stirrup and prepared for a leap that, on those rocks, could hardly prove less than disabling, if not death itself.

Even when the horse dashed away with that horrible scream, she had no hope. It was but the expiring effort of a death-stricken creature.

So assured was she that the collapse must come right speedily, that she gathered the reins in her hands, trying to check that frenzied dash sufficiently for a safe leap to the ground. But hardly had she done this, when a bit of lead cut one of the lines, and as it parted, with a faint twang, she almost lost her seat and fell backward.

The maddened steed gave a fierce toss of its head as the rein parted, and now, wholly beyond control, dashed on with renewed energy, each throb of its mighty heart sending out a crimson spray to mark its flight over the sun-whitened rocks!

With an effort Vesta Massey regained her balance, still holding the severed rein, lest its dangling end fall to the ground and trip up the frenzied animal, hurling both to death on the cruel rocks. Erect she sat, never flinching as the angry lead came humming by to flatten and rebound from the stone wall, or else to glance with distorted shape that lent a maniacal shriek to the bullet as it sped on at an angle.

Savagely Link Loper howls his warning after her, but she only hears his voice; his words of angry terror escape her comprehension. Swifter yet come the bullets, now sent from the repeater in a stream, almost without a thought of aim on the part of the ruffian in his wild eagerness to bring down the maddened steed.

For he knows, if she does not, what lies in the path!

Pale as death, yet firm and untrembling, Vesta Massey keeps her seat and takes in everything ahead. Even now she is not ready to give up in despair. Even now she is trying to see how she can best make her escape from those hated enemies who have dogged her flight from far away Deseret; from the father who would doom her to a life ten thousand times worse than death; from the suitor who would plunge her into the very depths of degradation while prosing of love and devotion!

And yet, it is not entirely for her own escape that she fights to keep her brain clear and her nerves steady. She knows that, when worst comes to worst, there is always escape possible while her arm has power sufficient to lift the muzzle of her revolver to her temple. But she is fighting for another life—for a life dearer even than her own!

Even in that critical emergency, Vesta Massey caught herself marveling at the tenacity of life her good steed displayed. Already that crimson trail seemed long enough to have drained its veins, yet the pain-tortured creature sped on without visible flagging; sped on as though more than mortal power strung its sinews.

Link Loper, cursing, screaming, desperately lowering himself from crag to crag, was left behind and out of sight. His rifle was long since empty, and he could do no more.

The pass was coming to an end. Already Vesta Massey could see the clear blue sky beyond, where the narrow defile spread out on either hand; already she could catch a glimpse of far-away trees and hills.

Out of the mouth of the pass leaped the maddened creature, blinded by death, unconscious of all save that horrible pain in its vitals. Out of the pass and straight ahead—straight on to the death of which Link Loper had vainly tried to warn the fugitive!

She saw it now, and did what she could to avert the threatening doom. She saw that, barely two hundred yards away the level ground abruptly ceased, in what she instinctively realized must be a frightful precipice.

Even in those few brief moments she could distinguish the slender tops of a few trees rising above the escarpment. She could see that the fall must be great, from the distant level of which she caught a passing glimpse.

Shortening the broken rein, she strove to turn the blind steed to one side, leaning forward as she tugged to strike him sharply on the opposite side of his head. For an instant the animal

yielded, thrown from its stride by the sudden force exerted, but then, with a fierce out-thrust of its head, the rein snapped again! And then, with a hoarse gurgle, accompanied by a gush of blood that flew in frothy spray back to almost blind the maiden, he plunged on, straight to a frightful death for both!

The fair fugitive thought to leap to the ground, but felt that her skirts were tangled. And then, brushing the blood from her eyes, she did what alone remained for her—pressed her pistol to the head of the pain-crazed horse, pulling trigger and sending a bullet crashing through its brain.

As though stricken by lightning the poor beast fell headlong in a quivering heap, hurling its rider over its head. Even then her nerve did not fail her. Even then she was brave and cool enough to make an effort to alight safely on her feet, though it looked as though that fall must hurl her fairly over the verge of the precipice.

The stout cloth gave way, but not soon enough to allow her to keep her balance. She fell heavily, but luckily on a level spot, though the rocks and boulders lay thickly scattered over the narrow level. She rolled over and over, until on the very verge—until it seemed as though she must fall over that dizzy height—until a gasping cry of horror parted her lips. But then, with a blind clutch her fingers closed on a stunted shrub growing on the very brink, and with a grip of death she clung to it, checking her progress even as her shoulders overhung that frightful depth.

She was lying partly on one side, so that she could look down to the death that awaited her—that seemed surely claiming her. For even as she looked, a portion of dry dirt and gravel gave way before the shock of her abrupt checking, and it seemed as though the edge was crumbling away beneath her body.

Another desperate effort—fighting back the deathly sickness which assailed her—rallying all her powers of body and mind, she dragged herself away from the precipice, unsteadily rising to her feet by the aid of the friendly shrub, staggering forward a few paces, only to reel and fall with a faint, gasping groan, her senses fleeing.

Link Loper paused in his frantic scramble down the steep face of the rock wall as he caught the sound of that shot.

"Was it her? Would she think o' that, I wonder?" he muttered, licking his thin, parched lips as he cast furtive glances in the direction from whence that echo emanated: the look of a man who feels some horrible sight awaits him in that quarter.

The shot seemed to recall him to something like his usual coolness, and he paused to regain the breath he had lost in that reckless scramble.

"Whichever way, breakin' the durned old neck o' me ain't gwine fer to mend it any. Hoss or human critter, I reckon it 'mounts to mighty nigh the same. A jump-off, or a tum'le ag'inst them pizen rocks won't leave much room fer kickin'. Waal, it ain't my racket! The boss said she must be tuck, ef it killed her. An' I reckon— A pizen pity, too! She was *sech* a daisy!"

Link Loper gave a start at his own tones. He cast a half-sheepish glance around him, as though afraid his pitying tones might reach other ears, to be turned to ridicule or worse. And then he resumed his perilous descent, pausing not until the bottom of the pass was gained.

A panting grunt escaped his lips as he strode along that crimson trail, marveling at the amount of blood lost without a sign of failing on the part of the death-stricken horse.

"'Nough to dreen a elerphunt dry, an' him runnin' like he wasn't tetched wuss then a 'skeeter-bite! I've turned a grizzly toes-up with a wilder shot then the one I giv' him, yit he—ef it wasn't fer the pitch-off I ketched a glimpse of, up yender!"

Hardened, crime-stained, reckless as he was, the gaunt trailer gave a shudder of horror as he thought of what awaited him; for he knew that only a miracle could have saved that fair young fugitive from instant death.

As he neared the mouth of the defile, his pace slackened despite himself. Although he felt there was barely the ghost of a chance for that poor, hunted creature to have escaped with life, he was reluctant to put that chance to the test. And thus it came about that Vesta Massey was given time to recover from the partial swoon into which she had fallen as she tottered away from the precipice verge.

Link Loper stopped short as his keen eyes rested on the prostrate shape of the dead horse lying, as it seemed from his point of view, on the very brink of that dizzy fall. A curious something seemed to rise in his throat and drive an unaccustomed mist before his eyes.

"I knowed it!" he muttered, huskily, then adding, with an oath: "But it ain't on *my* shoulders! The boss *would* hev it that way! Ef I hedn't done— Waal, now I will be double-durned!"

Sharp and explosively came that ejaculation from his lips, and as though unable to believe the evidence of his own senses, the trailer dashed a bony hand across his eyes to clear his vision.

Vesta Massey had regained her senses suffi-

ciently to realize the peril attending a further loss of time. She was still too greatly shaken to realize how much precious time she had lost in unconsciousness; indeed, it may well be doubted whether she knew that her senses had fled at all; but now she rose from the rocks to flee, hoping to gain a secure hiding-place before her pursuers could come within sight.

This it was that drew that sharp cry from the lips of Link Loper, driving all remorse from his brain and heart. And swiftly taking in the lay of the ground, the bony spy darted forward to cut off her further flight.

"Tain't no use, ducky-bird!" he laughed shrilly, as he saw the poor girl give a start of discovery. "I've got ye right whar—"

Only that one cry of despair; only that one shrinking movement; then Vesta Massey stood at bay, her white face sternly set, her dark eyes glowing with the fires of utter desperation as she cried out over her leveled revolver:

"Back, you cur! Back, I say! One step nearer, and I'll send you howling to Lucifer, your master!"

With almost ludicrous activity Link Loper darted aside and squatted down behind a friendly boulder hard by, sending his shrill tones around the covert:

"I ain't wu'th it, Miss Vesty! Don't waste your ca'tridges, honey! An' ef ye've got any bowels o' macey into ye, don't make the ole man a bloody murderer by forcin' him to kill or cripple ye 'long o' tryin' fer to slip away—now don't ye, pritty!"

Vesta Massey shivered slightly as she heard that voice and detected the real malice which underlay the counterfeited whine. She felt that Link Loper would turn his rifle upon her, just as ruthlessly as he had upon her poor steed, in case of necessity.

She had to struggle with her shaken nerves before she could risk her voice in reply, but it rung out, sharp, stern:

"Keep covered, then, your cur! It would be more of a disgrace than a sin to shoot you, but if you try to bar my way—"

"Would I ef I didn't hev to do it, pritty?" still more whiningly, hoping to hold her in parley until the arrival of his employer. "Ef ye knowed me wu'th a cent, ye'd know that it's tearin' the ole heart o' me clean out by the roots, jest fer to think o' standin' up ag'in' what ye want to do most—waal, now, it jest is, honey-bright! An' bein' so, why can't all two both o' us talk it over cam'ly an' fri'ndly, like, to see ef we can't come to some sort o' 'greement which—"

He stopped short, for he could see that the maiden was not listening to his words. Stealthily, ready to draw back his head on the instant in case of danger, the bony spy peered from his covert, noting the movements of his destined victim.

Vesta Massey glanced quickly, keenly from side to side, trying to decide in which direction lay her best chance of escape by flight. She dared not linger longer, lest her pursuers come up.

For the first time she saw how peculiarly lay the ground.

Directly opposite the mouth of the pass, the level stretched out for fully two hundred yards, covered thickly with great rocks and rugged boulders, here and there marked by stunted bushes; but, after all, this plateau was little more than a narrow tongue of land, bordered by the precipice which curved sharply on either hand, extending almost up to the rough rocky slope of the hills. And with a shiver of deepening despair she saw that no matter in which direction she might turn to flee, such flight would bring her still nearer the bony spy as he lay behind his cover. Unless—

She stepped backward, only to pause as Link Loper cried out:

"They ain't no use *that* way, Miss Vesty, onless you've sprouted a pa'r o' mighty powerful wings sense I see'd you last—no they *ain't*, now! You'd only break the pritty neck o' ye ef ye made the try!"

Back to her flashed the memory of that brief glimpse which she had taken of the dizzy depths while lying on the verge, and with a cold shudder she felt that his words were true.

The triumphing rascal laughed shrilly, seemingly able to read her thoughts, and the black muzzle of his rifle appeared beside the rock which covered his lank carcass, as though to emphasize his words.

"I ain't blamin' of ye fer feelin' like kickin', Miss Vesty; but, business is business, an' I'm workin' by the day, ye want to mind. Ef I was my own master, it's bubblin' over with joy I'd be to say take yer foot in yer han' an' pick out the trail ye like best. But thar's the boss to think of, mind ye! An' ef I was to do like that, whar'd I be when he come 'long this way an' held out the two han's o' him fer his da'ghter? Whar? Too dead to skin, in less'n a holy second!"

Link Loper was talking against time, hoping to keep the fugitive engaged until his employer could reach the spot; but for once his nimble tongue ran awry with him. That allusion to Wallace Massey stirred the maiden to desperation, and she resolved to risk that threatening

weapon rather than await the coming of a still more ruthless enemy.

There was a little wider space to the left, as she faced the hills, and with pistol ready to shoot in case Link Loper tried to intercept her, she sprang lightly forward—only to pause with a short cry of despair as a horseman came out of the pass, instantly veering to cut off her flight!

"Hold! Vesta, I command you, stop!" the rider cried harshly, then jerking his steed back to its haunches as a pistol covered him!

CHAPTER III.

A MAIDEN'S CHOICE.

His florid face turning to a sickly hue, Wallace Massey flung out an open hand as he shrunk back, his voice husky and unsteady:

"Girl, are you mad? Would you shoot me? Would you kill your own father?"

That movement had been purely instinctive on her part. Hunted down, penned in, her further flight cut off, it was quite as much chance as forethought that turned the deadly weapon against him instead of herself. But his cowardly shrinking brought back her scattered senses, even as his last words unchained her tongue.

"You are no father of mine, Wallace Massey."

He forced a laugh, coarse and unnatural.

"Ho! ho! ho! Not your—do ye hear that, gentlemen? Not content with— Girl," with sudden fierceness, hoping thus to overawe her, "are you mad? Have you gone crazy in good earnest? What do you mean by saying that I'm no father of yours?"

He was encouraged by the slow retreat of the maiden, though she still held him under cover of her revolver, and as he spoke harshly he touched his horse with the spur, only to check the jaded animal again as Vesta cried out, sternly:

"Back, Wallace Massey, unless you would force me to kill you!"

"Mad—mad as a March hare!" spluttered the fellow, dropping from his saddle, using his horse as a living shield, while glancing over his shoulder in search of his fellows.

It was their approach, more than dread of Wallace Massey himself, that led to the slow retreat of the maiden. She saw four horsemen come out of the pass, almost in a body, and though they abruptly drew rein at sight of the curious tableau, she more than half expected a united rush on their part as soon as they recovered from their surprise. To guard against this, she was increasing the distance they would have to cover, falling back toward the precipice, keeping a wary eye in the direction of Link Loper, who was now leaning on the boulder which had sheltered his lank carcass, a broad grin on his weather-beaten countenance.

"If I am mad, whose cruelty drove me to insanity?" sharply retorted the maiden, her black eyes flashing over her leveled weapon. "Whose but yours, Wallace Massey? Yours, backed by yonder currish rascal!" with a flashing glance at one of the more recent comers.

This was a short, thick-set, middle-aged man, with heavy features, whose pendulous lip drooped still lower as he caught those words and look. He started forward, abandoning his jaded horse, crying sourly:

"Talk enough, Massey! Why don't you exert your authority, now you have caught up with— Ow!"

Sharp and spitefully rung out the report, as a bit of lead hummed dangerously nigh his great ears, and with a muffled howl of surprised fear, Eli Prosser ducked down, scrambling awkwardly toward the nearest cover.

"That, as a warning to you one and all!" sternly cried Vesta Massey as she re-cocked her weapon, still slowly feeling her way backward toward the precipice. "The next shot will be sent in deadly earnest."

"But, curse it all, girl!" angrily ejaculated the man who claimed a parent's authority. "You dare not commit murder, even— Where is your mother—my wife, Vesta?"

Sharply, abruptly he shot out the query, as though hoping to catch the maiden off her guard; but if so, he was fated to be disappointed. She never noticed his question, then, though she spoke:

"If you love life, Wallace Massey, do not put me to the test. But it would not be murder, were I to shoot you down, one and all! You have driven me to utter desperation. You have cut off further flight. If you persist in crowding me, the consequences be on your own heads!"

"It's only a foolish girl talking," angrily cried out Eli Prosser from his covert, stealing a cautious glance as he spoke. "Send the men after her, if you're afraid to act yourself, Massey!"

"Nobody skeered but me, an' I ain't afraid!" laughed Link Loper, with a sly grimace toward the heavy-set Mormon. "But I wouldn't crowd her too mighty hot, boss," he added, soberly, as Vesta Massey paused only a pace or two from the verge of the dizzy depth. "Ef it was only us critters in danger, it wouldn't be nigh so ugly: but—say she takes a notion to fly over yender? An' I more'n hafe b'lieve she'll make a jump of it ef nothin' shorter'll kerri her cl'ar!"

Wallace Massey ground a vicious oath between his teeth as he listened, for he, too, knew

how near to desperation this girl had been driven. If not, would she have dared so much? Unless nerved by despair, would she have thought of flight through that worse than wilderness? And that other, his broken-spirited wife, would she have dared desert him, to risk death by thirst and starvation, to say nothing of other perils?

As these thoughts flashed through his brain, Wallace Massey began to realize that he had never fully understood this young girl whom he called daughter. He had known she was proud and spirited, but that she would dare all this—that she would openly defy him, openly deny him now that she was overtaken and her further flight surely cut off—he could never have believed, with less positive proof than this.

What if she should, as Link Loper hinted, choose death rather than submission? How could he hinder her?

To solve this question he set his cunning brain to work, at the same time bringing his tongue into use, softening both his manner and his speech for a purpose.

She could not escape them by flight. Let her have time to realize this to its full extent, and sober reason might come to aid his ends!

"Vesta, why will you be so foolishly reckless?" he called out, showing himself more openly, turning his tired horse loose, sending it back toward its fellows with a touch of his open palm. "Why will you persist in flying in the face of my lawful authority?"

"I deny your authority, Wallace Massey," was the prompt retort, in clear, cold tones.

"You are not yet of legal age, and—"

"Nor are you my legal guardian."

The Mormon flung out a hand impatiently, his tones harsher:

"Again that ridiculous idea, girl? If your mother has been lying to you—"

"Stop!" with ringing emphasis, her revolver once more covering his shrinking figure, steady as fate itself, her black eyes glittering dangerously over the polished tube. She is my mother! Not even you can speak harshly of her, without punishment!"

"She is my wife," was the sullen retort. "Or do you deny that claim, as well?" with an ugly sneer on lips and in voice.

"I wish I could!" with bitter emphasis.

"You can—with precisely as much truth as you can deny my being your father."

"Would a father treat me as you have? Would a father dare attempt to sell me, body and soul, to such a knave as Eli Prosser?"

An angry snarl came from the hidden Mormon at this, but his words were checked even as they started to his lips, by a gesture from Massey.

"If I promise to let the past be past, Vesta, dear?" he uttered, striving hard to smooth his tones, but succeeding only poorly. "If I agree to start over anew? Come, girl! Don't be obstinate. Maybe we've both made mistakes, but they can be rectified if—"

"Not after this fashion, Wallace Massey," was the cold interruption as her armed hand motioned him back. "Keep your distance, sir! I know your evil nature far too well now to ever again be taken in by your hypocritical whining. Back, I say!" with increased sharpness as the anger-flushed Mormon persisted in creeping nearer her position. "Another pace nearer, and I'll send a bullet through that false brain!"

Snarlingly he obeyed. He knew that she would carry her stern threat into execution did he "crowd" her further, just then. Still, he did not entirely despair of gaining his ends without personal peril.

"You are hard on me, girl; terribly hard, for a daughter! Of course you think you have cause for so acting, though it must all come through a miserable misunderstanding which a few earnest words will set aright. Give me the chance to explain, and all will be well, daughter!"

Vainly did he look for signs of yielding on her part. Cold and unmoved she stood, her armed right hand bent upward and back until the silver-sighted muzzle rested lightly against her shoulder, ready to be thrown down to a level on the instant. And then her left hand disengaged the second pistol from her belt, its sharp double click as the hammer raised sounding distinctly in the prevailing silence.

"There are no explanations which you can make, or to which I care to listen, Wallace Massey," was her cold response. "If ever there was a time when your tongue could make me believe white is black, that time has fled, never to return! And never again will words of yours influence me, in deed or thought!"

"You severed all such ties when you showed your cloven hoof! You forfeited all claims on my love, respect and obedience, when you forgot honor and manhood—when you swore to drive me, an unwilling, reluctant, loathing victim, into the arms of yonder vile cur, Eli Prosser!"

"Choke her off, Massey, curse you!" growled the Mormon, showing his anger-reddened face around the boulder. "Show yourself a man, for once! We've run her down—now take possession, can't you?"

Seemingly stung by these harsh words, Wallace Massey ventured to step forward, only to be again halted by the desperate actions of the young maiden whom he called his daughter.

The weapon in her right hand kept his person covered with marvelous steadiness, while her left hand rose until the glittering revolver rested its muzzle fairly against her own temple!

And clear, distinct, steady as ever, out rung her voice:

"Another step if you dare, Wallace Massey! I'll send my first shot at your scheming brain—my second—listen to my final warning:

"You have driven me to bay. You have cut off my further flight. I have foiled you in my dearest hope, by placing my mother where your evil eyes will never again rest upon her poor, faded, frightened face! I have left her in safety, beyond your reach for all time, and for the rest I care little.

"I would be lying were I to say that I am tired of life. I am young, and life is sweet. But dearly as I love life, it is not worth purchasing at the price of shame and degradation!

"You would lie—you would promise anything for the sake of getting me in your power once more, if only that you might wreak your bitter vengeance on me for baffling you so far, for robbing you of your once helpless victim—my poor mother! But—listen, and weigh my words well, for I call on High Heaven to bear witness to my resolve!

"Rather than yield to you now, rather than fall into your hands, to be transferred to the keeping of that vile, slimy, heartless reptile whom you call friend—Eli Prosser—I will kill myself!

"As Heaven hears my words, if you do not open to give me free passage, I will send a bullet through my own brain! And you shall not have even the scant satisfaction of gaining possession of my body. I swear to cast it over this precipice, even in death!"

Wallace Massey shrunk back with a low cry, for something told him this was no idle threat. Link Loper turned greenish pale, and rose from his careless seat, dropping his rifle, his muscles stiffening as though he would leap forward to save the maiden from her own hand.

Only Eli Prosser seemed unmoved by that clear, thrilling speech. He broke into a coarse laugh, an ugly sneer curling his thick lips as he cried out in angry mockery:

"She is lying, and you're a coward, Massey! Rush in on her, and all will go right, even yet!"

"Now, really, I wouldn't act so rudely, gents!" came a cold, yet pleasant voice from the rear and to the right of the Mormons. "I hate to chip into a private game, but when a fair lady is being crowded by a whole gang, I can't help it! No I can't—really!"

CHAPTER IV.

A BAD PENNY TURNS UP.

INSTINCTIVELY every eye turned in that direction, for such an interruption was wholly unexpected.

Not far away, near where the curving line of the precipice drew closer to the rugged hills, and about equidistant from the maiden at bay and the man who called her daughter, stood a tall, graceful figure, its lower half concealed by the gray boulder, on top of which lightly rested an elbow. Between the fingers of the carelessly drooping hand rested a cigar, from the snowy tip of which curled tiny blue curls.

Above the boulder showed the torso of a young man, muscular without clumsiness or heaviness, neat without a suspicion of foppishness, overtopped by a head and face which even the most prejudiced could hardly have called ugly.

Light-brown, almost flaxen-hued, hair and curling mustaches; the former close-cropped, the latter brushed well away from red, full, yet manly lips. The front of a soft felt hat was pushed back so as to fully reveal the face beneath, as well as to give the new-comer full use of his eyes. They were clear, keen, steady, gray as polished steel in the shadow, and were now rapidly summing up the odds before him.

It was a handsome yet strong face at which the startled Mormons cast their scorching glances; the face of a man who has seen life in its wildest, most dangerous aspect; the face one would rather see at his elbow than directly opposite, when an ugly storm is brewing.

"And who the deuce are you?" blurted out Wallace Massey, after one searching glance toward the new-comer.

One hand went up to smooth the blonde mustaches. Or was it to conceal the quick smile which curled those red lips?

"My daddy's son—my mammy's darling—no less, dear fellow!" he blandly murmured, with an exaggerated bow toward the scowling Mormon, who could hardly avoid noticing the brief yet keen glance which this stranger cast toward Vesta Massey.

"For their sake, then, go your own way, and don't try to mix in with our affairs. If not—"

"As you were saying, dear sir?" blandly uttered the stranger, his brows arching, his big eyes widening as with innocent curiosity.

"Pull out, or your mammy wouldn't know

you from a worm-eaten mummy after we get through satisfying your infernal curiosity!" coarsely cried Eli Prosser, rising from his covert to shake a huge, malignant fist toward the stranger. "Git! while the way's open, curse you!"

The stranger stepped out from behind the boulder, as though to obtain a clearer view of this blunt speaker, and for the first time the entire company could fairly sum him up, outwardly at least.

He wore a vest and short coat of crinkled seersucker, the narrow stripes of light blue on a cream ground. Beneath these a plain-fronted shirt, with broad, turn-down collar, cut low to leave the graceful neck untrammelled, a plain button of gold being the only ornament visible.

Riding-boots, spurred at the heels, rose above his knees, covering the lower portions of trousers made of light, soft corduroy, around the top of which was drawn a belt of silk webbing, thickly studded with metallic cartridges and supporting on either hip a heavy revolver.

It was no easy task to decide the class to which this stranger properly belonged, even for the experienced eyes which were rapidly "taking stock" just then. Stockman, speculator, wandering sport—who should say?

"Be durned ef he ain't tough leather, whichever way ye want to take 'im!" muttered Link Loper, as he gently slid toward the opposite side of his chosen covert, ready to duck and dodge in case of need.

"None so mighty tough but what I kin drill a hole clean through the critter, too quick!" growled his nearest mate, a short, squat, black-browed ruffian known as Rank Hammond, handling his Winchester with a vicious grip that spoke even more plainly than his tongue. "Ef the boss was only to give a sign—"

"The boss," otherwise Wallace Massey, showed still plainer signs of irritation as he watched the movements of this cool stranger, who was gazing at the florid face of the stout Mormon like one scanning a living curiosity.

"Who are you, anyhow?" he demanded, stepping forward a pace, one hand nervously fingering the pistol at his middle. "What right—"

"Call me George Penny, for lack of a better title," was the cool interruption. "And right there you have an explanation of what else appears to give you annoyance—my turning up when not wanted! You know the old saying? Well, I've been called a *bad penny* too numerous too mention, and if I do turn up—blame Dame Habit, and never frown on poor me!"

"Curse your name and your rattling tongue as well!" scowled the Mormon, flushing hotly like one who feels he is being made sport of. "If you are not a fool, you'll take a hint and pass on while the way's open."

"A bad penny can't pass—"

"Then we'll stamp it counterfeit!"

George Penny laughed, like one pleased rather than offended, and he nodded approval as he replied:

"That's one for you, dear fellow! Really, I didn't think it was in you. Which goes to prove that a fellow can't always tell a fool by his face. I'll never yield to first impressions again, for—"

"Will you travel?" grated Massey, turning white with rage as he caught a low, grim chuckle from the covert which sheltered Link Loper.

A sudden and complete change came over the stranger at this. All trace of languid levity vanished. His tall, athletic figure drew erect, his handsome features hardened. His gray eyes glowed with sudden fire. And there was a cold, stern resolution in his tones as he spoke:

"When yonder lady bids me go, perhaps; not at your bidding."

"What has she got to do with it?"

"Why is she facing you with pistol in hand? Why did she threaten to take her own life unless you gave her free passage?"

"There's room in the hole for him, too, if he won't make way!" cried out Eli Prosser, but taking good care to keep his own vile carcass under cover the while. "Ram a fist down his throat, Massey! Or, if that won't serve, try a bit of lead!"

"What a pity you're feeling too ill to come out an set an example!" sneered George Penny, with a short laugh as his hands deftly slipped both revolvers from his belt, one muzzle turning toward the stout Mormon's covert as he added: "Can't I coax you, bull-dog?"

At the same instant he jerked his head to one side with such suddenness that his hat flew away. A spiteful report split the air, and a blue puff of smoke curled up from the clump of bushes behind which Rank Hammond was crouching.

Only a practiced eye and a body trained in wild life could have saved the wandering sport from death by that treacherous shot. He had only a glimpse of the dark muzzle, but instinct warned him of danger, and a swift twist of his neck saved his head.

Quick as thought itself his pistol covered the bushes, his voice ringing out sharply, yet mixed with scorn:

"I owe you one, my black-avised rascal! Drop that gun, or I'll drop you! So—steady

as you are! I'll pay you off when cashing-time comes, never fear, my hearty!"

There was something so cool, so masterful, in his manner and speech that, reckless ruffian though he had so often proved himself, Rank Hammond instinctively obeyed, dropping his rifle and cowering there with a shiver of fear making his squat figure shake like a jelly!

And each one of the six Mormons could have taken oath that at least one of those polished weapons was covering himself.

George Penny looked at Wallace Massey as he added:

"From what you've said, stranger, I take you to be the head of this sweet crowd. If I'm right, just give the others a hint to keep their muzzles on for a bit, unless they want the fun of electing another chief. I couldn't miss your bigness, even were I to try: and I'm far too stingy to think of wasting a bullet!"

"What is it to you?"

"What it should be to any man with a spark of decency in his composition," was the swift interposition. "I heard you threatening this lady. I heard her say that sooner than yield to your brutal force, she would prefer death by her own hand. Hearing that—I'm backing her game, let it turn out how it may!"

"She's my runaway daughter, and—"

"So I heard you assert, and I heard the lady deny your claims. What a lady says, goes without further question, so far as I'm concerned. If that is not plain enough, I'll try to clinch it beyond the ghost of a doubt."

"You can't lay the weight of a finger on that lady while I've got strength to stand between you. If you think I'm bluffing, try it on. But pause long enough to reckon up the cost. It comes mighty awkward to a bashful man, this having to blow his own trumpet, but one never knows just what he can do until tested. And so—listen, will you?"

"I've got a full hand in each fist, as you can see for yourself. And if I do say it myself, I'll play them for all they're worth. Now, if you see fit, rush the betting!"

As he spoke, the wandering sport steadily moved sideways, as though meaning to gain the side of the maiden at bay. But he received an utterly unexpected check at the very outset.

Through all of this, Vesta Massey had kept on the alert. After the first leap of joy at the prospect of aid in her great trouble, her brain quickly filled with suspicion. Though this newcomer was a complete stranger to her, and seemed to be wishing her well, she felt that it was part of a cunning scheme through the workings of which the villain who called himself her father, hoped to secure possession of her without risking a shot for himself. And now, as George Penny moved in her direction, she covered him with a pistol, sharply crying:

"Hold! keep your distance, unless you are tired of living!"

The sport gave a start of surprise at this sharp challenge, but he never once removed his keen eyes from his foemen. He stopped short, with a prompt response:

"I hear but to obey, madam. And you, my fine fellows, bear in mind that I can empty shells just as accurately from this standpoint as any other. And if—"

From his covert, Eli Prosser had been snarling vicious instructions to his fellows, and from the cover behind which Link Loper haddropped at the drawing of pistols, shot out a tiny blue spout, from which sped a bullet winged with death.

Without a cry—without so much as a gasp or a groan—George Penny flung up his arms and turned half-way around, to fall like a log!

"Ye would hev it that way, durn ye!" grated Link Loper, as he peered curiously through the tiny blue cloud at his victim.

"Now—down her!" howled Eli Prosser, leaping to his feet and striding forward, though watching Vesta closely, ready to duck and dodge at her first threatening motion.

But the poor girl seemed wholly off her guard, just then. All her suspicions were brushed away by the treacherous shot and the fall of the stranger who had so boldly interfered in her behalf. She felt now how cruelly she had wronged him in her thoughts, and with a choking cry of regret and pity, she sprung toward him, for the instant forgetting her own great peril.

And seeing this, Eli Prosser, with Massey, hastened to make sure of their prize. But their victory was not yet ripe!

Vesta heard them, and sprung to her feet with pistol pressed to her own temple as she desperately cried aloud:

"Back, you foul assassins! Back—or I'll fall dead at your feet!"

The baffled Mormons paused, with cries of angry impatience, but before they could decide further, a harsh voice rung out:

"And I say back, you howling curs! Who is it dares to strike a blow or burn powder without my permission?"

The two Mormons stared open-mouthed at the strange vision.

CHAPTER V.

A MOUNTAIN CYCLOPS.

RISING above the edge of the precipice, a little to the left of the extreme point, was the

head and shoulders of a man, in whose great, hairy hands glistened a pair of revolvers in the red rays of the nearly setting sun.

A man, so far as shape and contour were concerned, but beyond this there seemed little human about the creature at first glance.

Mechanically both Massey and Prosser recoiled before that fierce glare, and then, without relinquishing his weapons, though how the feat was accomplished none of the onlookers could have told, the man shot up over the escarpment, striding forward like one wholly ignorant of personal fear.

And as he advanced, the Mormons retreated, awed by this strangely repulsive apparition. And Vesta Massey, though that voice had checked her hand just as she was on the point of pulling trigger, to escape worse than death, shrunk away with a shivering gasp of fright and disgust!

All of this the new-comer saw, and though he must have interpreted it aright, he broke into a harsh laugh like one delighted by such emphatic proof of his own terrors.

Of a figure which would have been almost gigantic if drawn erect, and which was even now above the mean height, this stranger was frightfully distorted and misshapen through accident. His back was bent at a sharp angle, giving him the appearance of bearing an enormous hump on his shoulders, and only for his neck being long enough to twist backward, his face must have been carried on a level with the ground.

His lower limbs were straight, long and muscular, but his arms bore the appearance of having at sometime far past been repeatedly broken, with each knitting giving the bones a different angle.

On his head rested a wide-brimmed felt hat, weather-worn and dingy, with the front pushed back, revealing his face with all its grim details as the red rays of the setting sun fell athwart it.

The face was framed by long, snaky locks of hair, once jetty black, but now thickly threaded with white. And over his thin lips dropped a pair of mustaches, long but not thick, the ends falling below his scarred chin. With this exception his face was bare.

What his complexion had once been, could only be surmised from the color of his hair and his eye—for he had but one: black as midnight, yet seeming to burn and glow like an orb of fire as it roved swiftly from face to face. For that face was covered over with scars; some a ghastly white, some of deepest scarlet, while others showed an ugly purple, all crossed with tiny red veins.

Where his left eye had once been, was now an empty socket, over which its useless lid twitched and worked curiously without cessation.

The garb of this frightfully disfigured and deformed being was rough and coarse, consisting of a gray woolen shirt, open half-way to the waist, revealing a broad chest seamed with scars similar in aspect to those which rendered his face an object of horror at first gaze. Around his waist was buckled a leathern belt, with loops full of fixed ammunition for the revolvers which still swung in his hands. A pair of brown duck trousers tucked into the tops of heavy boots completed his garb.

"Strangers, eh?" he croaked, his voice seeming to sink into his boots as he completed that keen, stern scrutiny. "I hardly thought any other would dare raise a racket on my stamping-grounds without leave. Empty hands, you curs!" with that cyclopean orb flashing fire afresh as he swung forward one crooked arm, covering the shrinking Mormons. "Would you crook a finger at me? At Daddy Dead-Eye, the king of all this region?"

"Good Lawd!" exploded Link Loper, shrinking still further behind his friendly boulder, though his quavering tones were still audible. "Tain't the likes o' me that'll try it on—nary time it ain't, now!"

"It's only one man—and what right has he to interfere?" muttered Eli Prosser, doggedly, a venomous light filling his little eyes.

The strange being who had proclaimed himself king, laughed harshly as his keen ears caught this muttering.

"The right of might, stranger! For stranger in these parts you must be, or you'd never question the power of Daddy Dead-Eye within eye-shot of Dew Drop! I'm a king! I'm a despot! I'm law and gospel unto all who come within these magic limits! If you doubt—I can send you to one who can teach you better: the devil, my side-pardner!"

With a wicked laugh, the stranger covered the stout Mormon with a pistol, his one eye glowing with malicious delight as its owner saw the fellow shrink tremblingly back.

"Bah! you oily cur with more barks than bites!" he scornfully cried, lowering his weapon. "A stout switch would be a more fitting tool to cow you with. Are all of you of his caliber?"

Wallace Massey, with a covert glance to assure himself that Vesta was not trying to escape under cover of this diversion, plucked up his courage sufficiently to utter:

"If we were as evil as you seem to infer, sir, your insults would have been wiped out in death

before this. But we want no trouble with you or yours. All we ask for is our rights, and—"

"You have none. No man has any rights while on my stamping-ground, save those which I grant him as a favor," bluntly interposed Daddy Dead-Eye, his tones sounding more natural as he added: "But I'm willing to listen to you, as long as you don't try to put on frills. What is it you claim! What have you been trying to do to that girl, yonder?"

"She's my daughter," shortly returned the Mormon, with a vicious glance toward Vesta, who was still standing near the spot where George Penny lay without motion, seemingly dead. "She ran away from her home, and led me a precious dance until I overtook her a bit ago."

"And yonder carrion?" with a side-nod toward George Penny.

"He run against a bullet while aiding that rash child," doggedly. "I warned him, but he would chip into a game where none wanted him!"

"No one? Not even the girl?" half-smiled Daddy Dead-Eye, his scarred face curiously softening as he looked at the maiden.

"She never saw him before. She even threatened to shoot the fellow unless he kept his distance."

"When you saved him the trouble?" laughed Dead-Eye, but with something of that former red light coming back to his one eye.

"One of my men shot him, as the shortest method of teaching him to mind his own business," with a sulkily viciousness as he cast a covert glance around to see if his fellows were within supporting distance. "But, I've said enough to show cause for my actions. I'm that wayward girl's father. She owes me obedience, and not even you can stand between us longer."

Not alone Wallace Massey, but his fellows as well, seemed to be recovering from the confusion into which this strange man had cast them, quite as much through his horrible disfiguration as aught else. And Link Loper, having keenly scanned the deformed from under cover, now boldly rose up and came sidling forward as he muttered:

"Shell I bounce the critter, boss? Shell I break his durned—"

That one blazing orb had followed him from the first. The hairy paws quietly thrust both pistols back into their cases, and as that vicious speech came from the wide lips, Daddy Dead-Eye gave a fierce growl of rage, then leaped upon the bony spy.

So sudden and wholly unexpected was this action, that Link Loper, old and wary sinner though he was, had no time to evade or resist that furious onset. And a gasping cry of pain and horror came from his lips as he felt that terrible grasp close upon him.

Seemingly with hardly an effort, Daddy Dead-Eye twisted the spy from his feet, whirling him into the air above his head, holding him helplessly thus while he leaped toward the precipice. Then, before a hand could be raised to interfere—before the gaunt fellow's comrades could fairly divine his danger—the giant deformed hurled the screaming wretch far from him, over the edge of the precipice.

Panther-like in his swift movements, Daddy Dead-Eye wheeled without a glance after the luckless wretch whom he had hurled down to meet what seemed almost certain death, and with each hand armed with a revolver, their muzzles menacing the startled Mormons, he thundered:

"Who's the next one to fly in the face of certain death? Who's the next to deny the rights of Daddy Dead-Eye of Dew Drop? One or all—it matters naught to me."

That fierce defiance remained unanswered. The awful suddenness and seeming ease with which this human monster had disposed of Link Loper—the hardest, toughest fighter among them all—cowed the remainder for the moment.

Then, from beyond the escarpment came a faint, choking cry, and, forgetting all else, Rank Hammond and his fellows rushed forward to stare down the dizzy depths with cries and ejaculations of wondering horror.

Like magic, Daddy Dead-Eye calmed down, though still keeping his weapons in hand. His tones were even, almost mild as he uttered:

"Better one death than half a dozen. And that living skeleton was evil to the very core. I could see sin and crime and all manners of wickedness sticking out of his every pore! But you—what were you saying when that fool cut in? You are that girl's father?"

"To my sorrow and shame I admit it," muttered Wallace Massey, with a vicious glance toward Vesta, who had shrunk further away, pale and trembling through all she had been called upon to undergo and witness, but still clinging to her faithful weapon.

"And she ran away from your fatherly protection?"

The Mormon flushed, then paled. But he dared not openly resent that thinly disguised sneer, and he replied:

"She ran away, aided and abetted by— But that don't matter!" he added, abruptly checking himself. "I have found her now, and not even you can stand between me and my legal

rights. She's not yet of age. The law would give me possession, if—"

"I am the law for this section, stranger," grimly smiled the deformed, his one eye steadily fixed on that florid face, as though striving to read all that lay below the surface. "But whether I grant you possession, depends on one thing more: Who aided this girl in her flight? Not yonder poor devil?" with a side nod toward George Penny.

"No. She never met him before this day that I know of."

"And her companion?" persisted Daddy Dead-Eye. "It was not one with a later claim than yours? The lady is single?"

Wallace Massey stared at the speaker in amazement for a few moments before rightly catching his meaning. Then, with a short laugh he replied:

"If you mean is she unmarried, yes. But she is scarcely less legally bound to my friend, Eli Prosser, her betrothed!" with a wave of his hand toward the stout Mormon, who tried hard to force a bland smile as he met that blazing orb, only to make a dismal failure of it.

"This—gentleman?" asked Daddy Dead-Eye, his scarred brows arching, his lips curling as he looked the stout Mormon over from head to foot. "She has promised to marry him, then?"

"A lie!" cried Vesta, her fear-sharpened hearing making out the words even at that distance. "I would rather die a thousand deaths than link my fate with his!"

"Do not listen to that crazy girl!" angrily cried Massey. "She is out of her mind! Her mother has—"

Again he bit his speech short, but Daddy Dead-Eye gave no sign that the words interested him. His voice was cold and even careless as he spoke again:

"If you speak truth, I'm almost sorry I chipped in. If the girl is single, and you are really her father, of course you have the right to reclaim her. Perhaps I can convince her, as well," with a short, peculiar laugh as he turned and moved toward the fair fugitive.

Only to stop short in his tracks as George Penny staggered to his feet, revolver in hand, a stern resolution on his blood-marked face as he threw forth his weapon, covering Daddy Dead-Eye, calling out:

"Play we don't, stranger! I'm backing this lady's game, just now!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE DESPOT OF DEW DROP.

CRISP and clear the words came, with much of the cool, even reckless disregard of odds which George Penny had displayed before the coming of Daddy Dead-Eye, but even the most thoroughly startled among those now staring in amaze at his sudden resurrection, could not help noting a significant difference.

Though living, where all had thought him dead, this wandering sport had not wholly escaped that treacherous shot. Even plainer than the little rills of blood which had marked his face, spoke the sudden unsteadiness of his athletic figure; and only for the friendly support lent by a ragged boulder close at hand, it looked as though he must have fallen again.

Eli Prosser showed his yellow teeth at this evidence of physical weakness, and Wallace Massey lost part of his angry surprise.

But if George Penny was weakened in bodily powers, his will and courage were strong as ever. With one hand he steadied himself against the rock, almost fiercely driving the bloody mist from before his eyes, summoning back his whirling, dizzy, fugitive senses.

"Asking madam's pardon, of course, for my presumption in chipping in without her gracious permission," he added, a faint smile coming into his face as he saw those dancing, whirling, phantom-like figures slowly growing less in number and more substantial to the eye.

Even in that moment he felt a glow of triumph at this victory over physical weakness through pure force of will.

Meantime, Daddy Dead-Eye was keenly scanning face and figure, his scarred face a blank, so far as emotion was concerned. He made no effort to draw a weapon, or to take his deformed person out of line of the business-like revolver which the wandering sport displayed.

Wallace Massey gave a start as a slight pluck moved his arm, and turned to meet the keenly suspicious glow of his friend's little eyes.

"Watch him—note them both!" hissed Eli Prosser, barely above his breath, holding himself in readiness to duck and dodge shot or blow in case the deformed should overhear his mutterings. "They've met before! It's all a put-up job to do us out of the girl! Don't you stand it, man! If you have to drop the devil with a snap-shot, don't you ever stand it, Massey!"

Bold words, but Massey shook that touch from his arm with sudden impatience, flashing a dark scowl at the stout Mormon. Eli Prosser had shown the white feather too plainly, too recently, for bold words alone to suffice.

"Shoot you, if you like!" growled Massey, in the same guarded tones used by his comrade. "I'm waiting for a better opening than—"

Both gave an instinctive start as Daddy Dead-

Eye moved forward a pace. If George Penny would only carry out his pantomimic threat by sending a bit of lead crashing through the skull of this hideous giant, the rest would be easy enough!

"Pray, who may you be, my doughty champion?" the deformed asked, his tones cold and hard as his scarred face was passionless.

The response came promptly enough, though it was easy to see that the sport welcomed a reprieve. With each passing instant his wits were growing clearer, his bodily powers recruiting, his nerves steeling.

"Too insignificant a body for your royal highness to notice even by a wink. A bit of stray change, too little for you to risk a crook in the back through stooping to pick up; nothing but a bad penny, my lord!"

Glibly his tongue rattled off the sentences, with a barely perceptible emphasis on that portion which seemed to cast a reflection on that distorted spine. And the two Mormons caught their breath sharply as they noted the swift flush which came and went from the face of Daddy Dead-Eye.

"Give him rope, and he'll hang himself!" muttered Massey, his evil eyes all aglow with expectation.

But once more he was fated to suffer disappointment. The deformed gave no further sign of having been stung, in look or word.

"I've seen worse-looking counterfeits, but, since that is your own valuation, I'll take it without further question."

"Good-day, my lord!" bowed the sport, with a bland smile. "A safe and speedy return to your castle, wherever that may chance to be! Beg pardon for detaining you even this long."

Just the ghost of a smile flitted across the scarred face, as if Daddy Dead-Eye was amused at this audacity; but his tones were hard, cold and metallic as ever when he spoke again:

"Once more, who and what are you? By what right do you step between father and child?"

"Who am I! George Penny by name. What am I? A man, I hope and believe; too much of a man to hear a lady crying for help without offering a helping hand in return," was the swift response.

The wandering sport looked and spoke more like his former self. He no longer leaned against the rock for support. The hand which held a heavy revolver, half-covering the deformed, seemed steady and strong as when it had held in check the Mormons a brief space before.

"Meaning yonder girl?"

"Meaning yonder lady—certainly."

"Is she your wife?"

"No!"

"Will she ever become your wife? Are you what is called engaged?" persisted Daddy Dead-Eye.

The response was by no means as prompt, and George Penny cast a quick glance toward Vesta Massey, who still stood with pistol in hand, longing yet not daring to attempt flight. Their eyes met for an instant, and the maiden instinctively shrank back a bit, shivering as if a cold blast had suddenly enveloped her person. The sport could not help noticing this, and his tones were colder, harder, as he spoke again:

"While denying your right to put such questions, I'll answer you, lest your impudence lead you still further. We are not engaged. Until this day, I never had the honor of meeting the lady. After I have opened a path for her feet, to go whither she wills, it is by no means likely we will ever meet again."

"You talk with wonderful assurance!" sneered the deformed.

"And you, with monstrous insolence!" quickly flashed the sport, his gray eyes glowing with a dangerous light as he took another step out from the boulder and added: "Who are you, anyway?"

"All that you see, and much more which you are in a fair way of learning, to your sorrow, my dandy cock-sparrow!" laughed the deformed, harshly. "Who am I? Daddy Dead-Eye, king of this section. Men sometimes call me the Despot of Dew Drop, because my slightest hint is law and gospel to all within sound of my voice; because at the lifting of a finger all men drop on their faces and grovel in the dust like curs!"

"You call them men?" sneered the sport, with curling lips.

"Ay! better men than ever stood in your boots. But let that pass for the present. One question at a time. You, I believe," turning his single eye briefly toward Wallace Massey, "claim to have legal authority over the young woman?"

"As her father—yes!" was the instant response.

"Which I deny!" cried out Vesta, with a flush leaping into her pale face. "You are no father of mine, Wallace Massey, thank Heaven!"

Daddy Dead-Eye glanced swiftly from one to the other, seemingly trying to get at the bottom facts. Before he could speak, Vesta added:

"Even when I knew no better, I felt none of the love and trust a child should bear its parent!"

Even then, I feared and doubted you! Now I know that it was the instinct of nature that guided me in all this; now I know that you were never my real father!"

Wallace Massey laughed harshly, his face hotly flushed, his voice hoarse and unnatural as he growled:

"That won't go down, girl. I'm your father, by law as by nature, and you can't get around it. Don't crowd me too hard, girl! I'll overlook your waywardness this time, if you promise to reform and behave yourself for the future. And as your father—"

"You are not my father. Mother has told me all, and—"

"Devil grill the lying hussy! I'll—"

He started back with a gasping cry as a bullet hummed so close to his ear that he flung up a hand to the tingling organ. And through the blue smoke of her shot, Vesta Massey cried sternly, menacingly:

"My mother! Dare to insult her, you coward!"

"Better button that lip, old fellow," coldly called out George Penny, with a significant movement of his weapon. "If another shot is called for, I'll spare the lady's cartridges by wasting one of my own. I'm backing her game, please bear in mind!"

"By what rights, may I ask?" coldly demanded Daddy Dead-Eye, with a single stride toward the sport, thus placing his deformed figure fairly between the maiden and the startled Mormon who claimed her as his daughter. "Why do you interfere between father and child?"

"I might retort by asking why you are chipping in without leave or license, stranger," retorted the sport, showing his white, even teeth beneath that blonde fringe. "But words enough have been spilled; let's get down to solid business."

"By a lucky chance I came this way, to see a gang of loafers threatening a lady—to see them driving her to desperation—to hear her declare her preference for death itself, rather than yield to their brutal force!"

"I'm bashful. It's mighty hard work for me to crowd into a private game without an invitation. But what could I do? Simply this: back the queen for all I'm worth! And having entered the game, I'm in to see it out, if it takes a leg! Only one thing can make me drop my hand: the lady's bidding me clear out and interfere no further."

With that sentence George Penny cast a searching glance toward Vesta Massey, as if to read her decision without words. He saw enough to confirm him in his first decision, and grimly added:

"I'm through talking, gentlemen. You're crowding the lady. As politely as I've got time, I ask you to step aside and leave her a clear trail, to go whither her will dictates. If not—if you are impolite enough to bold your ground—then I'll see if I've forgotten how to open a road!"

In every tone, in every look, the wandering sport plainly meant business, and both Massey and Prosser cast uneasy looks around in quest of their hired bullies. But the roughs were not visible at first glance. Doubtless they had taken to cover, the more surely to save their own precious hides!

Old Daddy Dead-Eye showed no trace of uneasiness. And as George Penny, readily recognizing in him the most dangerous obstacle which stood in the way, covered him with a revolver, his long mustaches curled and twitched with the cold, mocking smile that moved his lips.

"Bold talk for a young man in the presence of his elders!"

"I'm through talking, and ready to act as soon as the lady signifies her wishes," was the cold response. "If you are in her path, old fellow, I advise you to be getting a move on yourself while you can."

"The lady will remain where she is, until this little dispute of authority is settled. And you, young fellow, will show better sense by changing bluster for meekness. Boys should be seen, not heard!"

Despite his nerve, George Penny flushed hotly at this coldly insolent speech, and there was danger in his glance as he kept the deformed covered. Unless really the madman he looked and acted, Daddy Dead-Eye must have known this, though he did not show as much by his actions. For he leisurely moved toward the sport, his hands empty, his crooked arms folded across his chest, a cold smile on his scarred face.

"For the last time—halt!" sharply cried Penny.

"For the last time—put up your gun and simmer down! I've told you I'm the law and gospel of this region; don't force me to be its executioner, as well!" coldly retorted Daddy Dead-Eye, still advancing, still with that icy smile upon his lips, that strange glow in his eye.

"Two steps nearer and I'll kill you!" sharply cried the sport, in deadly earnestness. "One—at your second—you will have it!"

Slowly, steadily, as he had begun, Daddy Dead-Eye paced on. And at his next footfall, George Penny pulled trigger!

CHAPTER VII.

DADDY DEAD-EYE PROVES HIS TITLE.

SCARCE a dozen feet separated breast from muzzle, and death seemed inevitable unless the nerve of the wandering sport should fail him in the last moment of grace. Yet the deformed steadily took the step which he had been warned would carry him across the death-line, and as he did so, the hammer fell to ring out his doom as George Penny firmly believed.

But, by one of those strange coincidences which are occasionally met with in this life, that one particular cartridge proved defective! The hammer tripped and fell with a dull click, but no explosion followed. And with a sneering laugh, Daddy Dead-Eye sprang into swift life and motion.

It is so seldom that this happens; so rarely that one finds a defective cartridge in these days of fixed ammunition; that even this steel-nerved sport was taken aback for an instant when he found himself betrayed by his faithful weapon. He had felt so certain that the deformed stranger would fall in the throes of death at his touch, that he had calculated no further, had taken no look beyond that point. And before he could make another attempt, the Despot of Dew Drop was upon him, like a human tiger.

With a single leap he covered the distance, his hairy paws closing on the armed hands of the sport, twisting the weapons from them and casting them aside, seemingly without an effort. Then, with horribly scarred face grinning into that of his antagonist, Daddy Dead-Eye cried in viciously mocking tones:

"How now, braggart? What, are you to fly in the face of my orders? Bah! you poor weakling! Just so—"

George Penny, calling up all his powers, strove to free his hands, to turn the tables on this human tiger, and though that sneering grin still distorted the face of the deformed giant, his speech was cut short. Weakling as he called the sport, Daddy Dead-Eye had to fight for the mastery, and fight hard!

Confused, bewildered by these rapid changes, Vesta Massey stood on guard, even now undecided whether to regard this handsome stranger as friend or traitor. And, too, the frightfully disfigured creature who proclaimed himself lord and master of all in that region, inspired her with something close akin to superstition. Surely he was either more or less than human!

Just as her enemies, Vesta stood like one under a spell as she watched Daddy Dead-Eye slowly striding toward the armed sport in whose blood-stained face there was death to be read. Like them, her pent-up breath broke free with a gasp as that dull click came instead of the expected death-flash and report. And when Daddy Dead-Eye sprang upon George Penny with that harsh, mocking laugh, the maiden gave a faint cry of fright as she started back, turning as if to flee.

Wallace Massey saw this—saw her foot catch against a protruding rock—saw her fall heavily. And, with a single glance to assure himself that both Daddy Dead-Eye and George Penny were engaged with each other, he started forward as he called out to Eli Prosser:

"Come on—now's our chance! Once get our hands on the little hussy, and—"

His words were cut short by a grating curse as Vesta sprang to her feet again, threatening him with her revolver, utter desperation in both face and tones:

"Back, you villain! Never alive—never by your foul touch!"

The two Mormons came together with a violent jar, and the pale-faced maiden gained a few paces more before they could recover. And as she warned them again, she kept feeling her way backward in the direction of the precipice where she had first turned to bay.

"Keep back, I warn you both! You have driven me to desperation now, and I'll wash my hands in blood before your touch shall disgrace me further! Back—if you still love life!"

"Vesta—child—would you shoot me? Would you turn parricide?" hoarsely cried Massey, his face convulsed with strong passion, yet with a certain terror visible in his blue eyes.

"I swear to kill you sooner than yield," was the response, with sudden and complete alteration of manner and tone.

There was no longer that wild, almost hysterical excitement. Instead, the maiden seemed cold as ice, firm as fate itself. A steadier hand never held pistol at a level than the one which now covered Wallace Massey and his companion.

Intense though his own excitement, and great his anxiety to fairly secure the prize he had chased so long and far before that strangely disfigured being could interfere again, the Mormon dared not act on his impulse to rush forward in the face of that danger. He knew that to do so would be almost certain death at the hand of the girl who had for years called him father!

"Thank heaven! I know the truth at last—know that I owe you no love, no obedience—know that none of your blood flows in my veins!" added Vesta, still moving cautiously in the direction of the precipice, feeling her way

with her feet, never once removing her gaze from the inflamed face of the man whom she thus addressed.

"Still harping on that worn-out string?" grated Wallace Massey, the picture of baffled rage and longing. "If not your father, who are you? Do you deny your mother, as well? If you acknowledge her—and she my lawful wife—how dare you repudiate me?"

A swift flush passed over the maiden's face at this blunt insinuation, but beyond that she gave no sign. A single swift glance over her shoulder showed her that the escarpment was only a few feet distant, and as though satisfied with that, she stood firm, facing the two Mormons with cold dignity, with unshaken resolution that lent her further words an emphasis beyond the inflection of her clear voice:

"You defeated yourself, Wallace Massey, when you tried to force me into the arms of that miserable whelp of Satan at your shoulder. That was the last feather! And when you refused to hear the prayers of the poor woman who had given up all else to become your bond-slave—when you lifted your brutal hand to silence her pleadings for her child with a blow—when you laid her low in the dust at your feet, her blood staining your base hand—you broke the ties that held your slaves!"

"We fled, as you know, and as we fled, my mother told me all: told me that you had no real claims on my love or duty. It was hard to draw this from her poor lips, so completely had you broken her spirit during those long years of sickening slavery. But she did tell me. She felt that the hour was coming when I would feel the need of some armor—when nothing less would enable me to resist your claims!"

The maiden spoke rapidly, though with much firmness. But Wallace Massey made no effort to cut her speech short.

His crafty eyes roved over the rock-strewn point, hoping to discover one or more of his tools making an attempt to turn the tables. Until then he had no time for such a search, and he had seen or heard nothing from Rank Hammond and his fellows after they rushed toward the precipice as that wild scream of horror floated upward from the lips of Link Loper, the bony spy.

An ugly glitter leaped into his eyes as he saw Hammond crouching by a rough mass of stone, near the verge, but beyond easy reach of the maiden at bay. Then—he bit his lips until the red blood showed, at the same time giving a warning hiss to Prosser lest he ruin all when his eyes saw that gaunt, ungainly figure as it slowly, silently lifted itself up from behind the escarpment!

Vesta ceased speaking, and lest her ears should catch a sound too soon for his reviving hopes, Massey hastily called out:

"And what has it come to, child? What good has her lying words done you? I've caught up with you at last! I've got you now—and I'll get her before many more hours!"

"You will never meet her again in this world—nor in the next, Wallace Massey!" promptly retorted the maiden. "And as for me—listen to my words, and mark them well! I hold my life at my finger's end. If I cannot go free with life, I'll find freedom in death! Sooner than feel the touch of your crime-stained hand, I'll send a bullet through my brain, then send my body down to nothingness on the rocks below!"

None who heard and saw her then, could doubt her perfect truth and stern resolve. Death would be welcomed, rather than captivity.

Yet Massey bit his lip to stifle a laugh of exultation, and Prosser averted his broad, oily face, lest its beaming should warn the girl whom he had sworn to make his fourth wife. For, crouching on the verge of the precipice, directly behind the erect figure of the unsuspecting maiden, Link Loper was gathering his energies for a cat-like leap which they hoped would end in their complete victory!

"Don't—hold your hand, rash child!" hoarsely cried Wallace Massey, with well counterfeited dismay, flinging up a hand which really signaled the bony spy to do his work quickly. "Rather than that, I'll forego my claims—I'll let you go your own way and—Ha! ha!"

Swift and sure the bony spy made his leap, catching the armed hand of the startled maiden, twisting from it the revolver, then restraining her desperate struggles by twining his skeleton-like arms about her person, lifting her from her feet and bearing her swiftly forward to meet Wallace Massey as the Mormon sprang forward with that exultant laugh parting his blood-tinged lips.

All this passed with far more rapidity than it can find record, and Daddy Dead-Eye was still engaged in overcoming George Penny, weakened though the sport was by that skull-deflected shot from ambush, when the despairing shriek broke from the lips of the outwitted girl.

"Hold!" the deformed thundered, leaping to his feet, his scarred face glowing with angry surprise as his single eye took in the scene.

"Rally, lads!" cried Massey, his hands arming as he turned to face the Despot of Dew Drop.

"We've got our own, and I reckon we can hold fast to it against any one man!"

Link Loper held Vesta in such a manner that he was pretty effectually shielded by her form. Rank Hammond and his two mates came forward, weapons cocked and ready for use at a sign from their leader. And Eli Prosser, now that his coveted prize was fairly secured, showed that he was ready to risk something rather than lose it again.

Daddy Dead-Eye took all this in at a glance, but, instead of his rage and chagrin growing, they were swept away by a cold, sneering laugh as he confronted the party, now collected near the point.

"Fools!" he cried, with curling lips, his one eye glowing like a ball of living fire, his arms folding across his chest. "Ay! worse than fools, else you would never fly in the face of my warning!"

"Hard words won't mend the matter," said Wallace Massey, taking a single step in advance of his little party. "We're not anxious for a row, even with the odds all on our side. We came here for a certain purpose, and having accomplished that—having secured possession of this rash, wayward child—we are ready to go our way and leave you to go yours."

"If I should say not?" sneered Daddy Dead-Eye. "If I should be rash enough to bid you stay—bid you await my permission to depart? What then?"

"We'll go, all the same," was the dogged response. "You're only one man against six. We want to go peaceably, but—we're going all the same!"

"And how, pray?" laughed the deformed, his crooked arms unfolding, one hairy hand swinging around toward the spot where the Mormons had left their jaded horses. "On yonder poor beasts? Not if I make this simple gesture!"

A wave of his hairy paw, and instantly each saddle was filled by a man—each horse was turned around, and ridden leisurely in the direction of the pass through which the pursuit had led!

For an instant the Mormons stood aghast, bewildered, unable to comprehend the whole truth. Then, casting his captive into the arms of her father, Link Loper caught up a rifle and leveled it at the horsemen.

Daddy Dead-Eye cried out sharply. A dozen armed men sprang up in sight, their ready weapons covering the amazed Mormons!

CHAPTER VIII.

AN AMAZON IN THE SADDLE.

DADDY DEAD-EYE laughed wildly, his crooked arms swinging above his head, his one eye glowing vividly as he danced about in crazy glee, his every look, his every action, more those of a crack-brain than one wholly sane and in full possession of his reasoning faculties.

"Ho! ho!" he laughed, his tones harsh and croaking as those of an excited raven. "Would you, my skeleton? And you, gentlemen from the land of many wives? Ho! ho! ho!"

Then, with another of those abrupt changes which added so much to his natural repulsiveness, he ceased his mad dance, drawing his distorted figure as erect as circumstances would permit, and facing the armed men whom his signal had brought forth, as it seemed, from the bare earth to work his arbitrary will, he cried coldly:

"Attention! What will you do if I lift my hand?"

"Shoot down every soul of 'em!" was the terribly prompt response from the lips of a little man in gray who stood in the front rank.

"Girl and all?"

"An angel itself, if one stood before us!"

With another wild laugh, Daddy Dead-Eye turned to note the effect of these words on the little party.

Link Loper was cowering behind his mates, his bony hands fastened on the broad shoulders of Rank Hammond, using that squat ruffian as a living shield. Wallace Massey held Vesta firmly at his side, though his face was sickly in hue. Eli Prosser stood in dogged silence, and the other ruffians visibly shivered with fear.

To one side, leaning against a rock, weak, dizzy, overcome by his desperate struggles while still partially unnerved by that glancing shot above his temple, George Penny was watching the curious tableau as well as he could through the dim, quivering mist that veiled his eyes.

As though satisfied by what he saw, Daddy Dead-Eye lifted a hand, and his armed men sunk down behind the coverts from which they had so unexpectedly arisen at his silent command.

"You have played your part," the man of the mountain uttered, coldly. "I think I'll have no further difficulty in managing the strangers."

Another signal, and the armed men rose, turned their backs and silently strode away on the trail of those who had ridden away the horses. Daddy Dead-Eye watched them until they vanished in the mouth of the pass, then turned once more toward the Mormons, his voice and manner curiously affable, though his one eye still glittered and burned.

"You should feel both proud and thankful, my good people, for it is not often that I take so much trouble to make my meaning clear; as a

rule, I prefer my works to answer. But with a lady—will you kindly remove your arm, Wallace Massey? I fancy you are cramping the child!"

Involuntarily the Mormon obeyed, and Vesta, with a gasping sob, drew hurriedly apart from their captors. And with his vision slowly clearing, George Penny silently drew to her side, his features stern-set, though his hands were empty and he had not a weapon left.

Wallace Massey gave a sulky snarl as he saw this, and his eyes were full of poorly-hidden hatred as they flashed for an instant into that frightfully scarred face before him.

"You've got the power, and I suppose we've got to submit. What do you mean to do with us?" he slowly, painfully uttered.

"Request the company of one and all until I can get to the bottom facts of this curious case," was the prompt response, in bland tones. "There's evidently a mistake on one side or the other. It may take time to get at the actual facts, but of time I have plenty and to spare. I'll carefully investigate, and when I discover the truth, I'll apologize to the injured party, and do all that lies in my power to make ample amends. Until then—please consider yourselves my guests."

Wallace Massey involuntarily cast his eyes about him, and Daddy Dead-Eye laughed—a curiously soft, mellow note it was, after the harsh and grating tones which had come before.

"Not here, my friend, but down yonder—you can catch a glimpse of the outlying buildings if you follow my finger carefully—in our neat little village of Dew Drop. We will go there, and I'll prove to you the claim I made of being king over all this region."

"Wait a bit, your royal highness," coldly interposed George Penny, now a trifle in advance of Vesta Massey, who gave a little start and shiver as the deformed giant uttered those words. "Don't you think you're taking just a little too much for granted? Wouldn't it be a bit more polite were you to learn the wishes of at least one—of this lady?"

Daddy Dead-Eye turned upon the wandering sport with a dark frown, but made no attempt to check his speech. When Penny ceased, he said:

"In other words, young fellow?"

Penny turned to the maiden, uttering softly, yet not too low for the rest to catch his meaning:

"Say that you will trust me, madam; say that you prefer to chance it in my company, and I'll do what a single man can to set you free and on your way again."

For a single breath Vesta hesitated, her dark eye passing from the blood-marked face which bent over her, to that deformed being, then back again. What made her shrink back from that face, from those steady gray eyes? Surely she could not doubt his honest intentions, after all he had risked in her behalf?

Right or wrong, George Penny thus interpreted her shrinking, and he drew erect, his face harder, sterner than before. In silence he waited her answer, so slow in coming; but Daddy Dead-Eye seemed less patient.

"Your decision, fair lady?" he cried, blandly, yet with a certain menace underlying his tones as she believed. "Remember, though, that once given it cannot be recalled, let the consequences be what they may. Will you trust to my hospitality, with a chance of going free on proof of your claims being just? Or will you go with this gallant knight-errant and—share his reward?"

Another glance, and Vesta Massey drew further away from the young man who was prepared to risk his life in her cause. Her lips parted as though to explain, but the wandering sport spoke too quickly for that:

"May you never have cause to regret your decision, Miss Massey. I humbly beg pardon for chipping in where not wanted. I reckon the last drink I took must have all found its way to my brain, or I'd never have made such a terrible blunder. As the very least I can do, I'll take myself out of the way—and your sight."

With a low bow as he uttered the last words, George Penny turned on his heel, and without a look toward Daddy Dead-eye or the Mormons, strode leisurely away in the direction from whence he had come; not by way of the pass, but along the curve of the rock wall, to the right.

For a single breath all present seemed taken by surprise, but then Daddy Dead-Eye cried out harshly:

"Go easy, young fellow. You were included in my invitation."

"Which I beg leave to decline," coldly responded Penny, without even deigning a backward glance or checking his leisurely paces.

"Stop!" thundered the deformed, his demand being emphasized by the sharp, double click as he cocked a revolver.

The white face of the sport showed for an instant over his shoulder at that command, but he simply flung back the words:

"If you can't hit the bigness of my back you've little business carrying a gun."

"I don't want to kill you, but—"

"Am I begging you to set up a slaughter-

house? But, as for my stopping, even at your royal commands, I really couldn't think of it."

And seemingly as cool and unconcerned as though not even the ghost of danger, threatened, George Penny kept on at the same easy pace.

It was a wonderful exhibition of pure "sand."

Daddy Dead-Eye dropped his weapon until its silver sight shone like a tiny button against those trim shoulders, but before he could pull trigger—granting him the brutality necessary for such a cold-blooded act—the clattering of a horse's hoofs in rapid gallop came echoing around the curving wall.

The deformed raised his weapon without firing, a curious glow leaping into his one eye. George Penny did not alter his pace, though it was clear to be seen that he had caught those sounds, and felt interested in what was coming.

Then, dashing around the curve, riding a spirited steed at full speed along the narrow trail, with a dizzy depth at one side, so near that an outstretched hand would clear the escarpment, came the vision—for only that term can fitly describe what met their gaze in such a wild and comparatively uncivilized region.

Upon a coal-black steed, sat a woman with long and flowing habit, the cloth of deepest crimson, the facings of orange velvet and gold braid. Upon her head was a scarlet turban, over and behind which floated a rich crimson plume. About her trim, round waist gleamed a belt of broad silver links, above which showed the pearl and silver butt of a revolver.

This much—a brilliant blaze of color—all could see as the black horse came dashing around the curve; but George Penny saw much more than that, even before the fair Amazon wrenched up her snorting steed with a sudden tightening of the reins that sent him quivering back upon his haunches.

He stood like one suddenly turned to stone, staring at that darkly-beautiful face—a face richly flushed with color up to the moment when their eyes met. Then the color faded out, and a half-frightened, half-defiant glow leaped into those great, jetty orbs!

The harsh, croaking laughter of Daddy Dead-Eye rung out as he saw the equestrian, and he slipped his revolver back into its case, as if he had no further use for it just then.

"Ho! ho! my gallant young rover! Since you scorn the persuasion of dull bullets, let's see how you'll pan out against bright eyes in the head of lovely woman! Lightning Kate!"

With a start and sudden return of brilliant color, the fair Amazon glanced past the wandering sport, ejaculating sharply:

"Daddy Dead-Eye!"

"Ay! and still the Despot of Dew Drop—still king of all who set foot within these domains!" with another croaking laugh as he added: "Even you, my bonny black-eyed queen, are bound to do my bidding—to obey my every order, no matter how capricious they may be! And so—drive yonder stubborn fellow back this way!"

"And if he should refuse to be driven, Daddy?"

"Drive a bit of lead through his empty skull!"

An almost savage glitter came into those black eyes as Lightning Kate drew the revolver from her belt, thumb on hammer as she leaned a little in her saddle, gazing direct into those gray orbs, saying:

"You hear that? Will you turn face about, or—shall I?"

There was something akin to death in that glance, and as he recognized this, George Penny bowed mockingly, his lips curling with undisguised scorn as he coolly uttered:

"I am not deaf, if I was once worse than blind, Lightning Kate."

"Turn back, then, or I'll drill your brain!"

"Turn back it is, of course. I'll take a double dose of shame and humiliation, rather than give you the exquisite pleasure of killing me," laughed the sport, shrugging his shapely shoulders as he turned right about and leisurely moved back to where Daddy Dead-Eye was watching, laughing, grimacing, dancing about with a return of his former lunacy—for surely he could not be wholly sane!

For one instant the cool sport was in greater danger of death than he had been when covered by the pistol of the deformed. If ever woman was powerfully tempted to commit murder, Lightning Kate was tempted just then. And she might have yielded to the temptation, had not Daddy Dead-Eye, who apparently saw everything, called out:

"Spare your powder and lead, my bonny! He's coming back to the fold, meek as any other lamb. And I've use for him—perhaps."

With a sharp stroke of the spur, Lightning Kate gave her steed free rein, dashing swiftly past the little party, her jetty orbs seemingly filled with fire as they rested on the face of Vesta Massey.

CHAPTER IX.

MAN, LUNATIC, OR DEVIL?

DADDY DEAD-EYE ceased his wild caperings as the black steed dashed past him, its iron-shod hoofs casting a little shower of dust and

gravel even to his feet. He half-lifted his right hand, and it seemed as if he was about to sharply hail the fair Amazon; but if so, he altered his mind, standing in silence and watching until that brilliant figure was lost to view. Not by way of the pass, but around the eastern curve, where the trail, as in the opposite direction, seemed to blend with wall and precipice only a few rods from where the party, so curiously brought together, stood watching her reckless retreat.

Not the least keen pair of eyes belonged to George Penny, on whose lips seemed frozen the half-sneering smile with which he had bowed his submission to the beautiful Amazon. And when the woman vanished from view, a long, deep breath came from his lungs.

"Ho! ho! ho!" laughed the deformed giant, wheeling about with a wild flourish of his crooked arms, his single eye glowing and blazing as though backed by living fire, his frightfully-scarred countenance twisted into a diabolical smile. "Did I speak falsely, my gallant rover? Was I drawing the long-bow when I claimed to be all-powerful in this glorious region? Can ye doubt, after such proof? When even Queen Kate yields unquestioning obedience? Ho! ho! ho!"

The Mormons drew stealthily apart, pale-faced and uneasy-eyed, with growing fear of this remarkable man. Even George Penny felt a thrill of alarm as he met that wild glare, as he noted the change for the worse which marked both the actions and the tones of this self-styled monarch. Surely he was insane! No man in his sober senses could or would betray such wild extravagance in word or action!

"She is your queen, then?" asked the sport.

"Mine?" echoed the deformed, flinging back his head, uncovered since his struggle with the sport, the action tossing his Indian-like locks of iron-gray clear of his scarred face and temples. "Ay! mine—even as all else, living and dead, mortal and immortal, the airy phantoms of the air as well as the crawling reptiles below—all mine! All own my mastery! All come and go at my slightest beck and nod! Why not? What's the sense of being king, unless you're obeyed?"

In startling contrast came the last sentence. Daddy Dead-Eye lowered his voice and thrust his scarred face toward the sport, his one eye filling with low cunning, his long mustaches curling and twisting with the smile on his lips, a long finger tapping his nose. And in a hoarse, rasping whisper he muttered:

"They can't help it, ye see, though I've never let a mortal into the secret before. They've got to obey—they've all got to dance when I fiddle, sore bones or gouty toes, for—hist! while I breathe in your ear a bit, my gallant lad!"

Daddy Dead-Eye cast a swift, suspicious glance toward the huddled group of Mormons, then, with a cat-like step, he gained the side of the wandering sport, one hairy paw curving alongside his lips as they approached the ear of the one whom he had so suddenly chosen as a confidant.

It was no easy matter for George Penny, strong though his nerves were as a usual thing, to keep from starting back in mingled fear and disgust from that whisper. More firmly than ever was he convinced that Daddy Dead-Eye was a lunatic. And his flesh seemed to crawl as those long hairs touched his ear. He half-expected to feel those yellow teeth close upon his flesh.

"I can't wholly break the seal, but—when Satan chipped the shell, I began to peep! See? Eh? Mum's the word, my covey!"

With a chuckle and a knowing nod, Daddy Dead-Eye drew back, his head on one side, his single eye filled with crazy cunning as he noted the effect of his whispered revelation. Grimly fantastic he looked, and despite himself, George Penny could not help laughing, though this was cut short as he thought of Vesta Massey in the power of such a being.

Fleeting though his glance was as he thought of the maiden, that wonderful eye intercepted it, and as Daddy Dead-Eye followed its direction, one brown, hairy hand passed slowly over his face. There seemed to be magic in the motion, for it left his countenance grave and composed, more like that of a sane man than at any time since George Penny first rose up in flat opposition to his will.

He moved toward the maiden, and as she involuntarily shrunk back, he instantly paused, his tones soft, mellow, courteous.

"You have no real cause for fright, Miss Massey. There can be no guilt concealed behind so fair a mask, and only the wicked have cause to tremble before my presence. Be assured; banish your doubts, and put your faith foremost; it will never be betrayed by your poor servant!"

This was a fresh phase in that curious character, but the poor girl seemed scarcely less frightened by it than while Daddy Dead-Eye was at his wildest. She shrunk still further back, pale, scared, so weak that only for the timely support of a boulder, she must have sunk to the ground.

George Penny started forward, seemingly forgetful of his recent repulse, but he paused again

as Daddy Dead-Eye, with a low bow toward Vesta Massey, turned once more to the handsome young sport.

His mild mood was still uppermost, and though his hands dropped to the belt about his waist, drawing a brace of pistols, it was only to deftly transfer his grip from butt to barrel as he reached out his hands toward the young man, smiling as he uttered:

"Take your guns, pardner, and try to forget that you ever lost them through my doings. It was a bungle all 'round, I reckon. I thought you were inclined to ruffle on my walk, and so—oh? There can't well be more than one chief to a tribe, and whatever my failings, I'm still high-muck-a-muck of this region!"

George Penny was not slow to accept the weapons, and his gray eyes glittered brightly as he felt them safely within his grasp once more. Now, if the worst came to worst, he could at least defend himself.

For, despite this curious change in the manner of the deformed, he was far from certain that all peril was past. If anything, it made him still more watchful. What would be the next change? How long would it be before this strange man broke out again, still more dangerously?

Daddy Dead-Eye turned to the little group of Mormons, singling out Wallace Massey as their acknowledged head, speaking bluntly, rapidly:

"I'm not sure I'd have chipped in, had I known what a mixed-up affair waited; but I'll not turn back now. You will bear me company down to town—it's not so far, when you once learn the trail. You can consider yourselves my guests, until I can learn the bottom facts in this dispute. Then—well, time enough for that!"

He turned half away, without giving Massey a chance to speak in answer. One hand flew up to his bare head, and repeatedly crossed his scarred temples. A dark flush crept into his face, and curious sounds rose in his throat. Great veins began to swell on his forehead, and the rose-hued twilight was reflected from drops of sweat that started out on his brow.

A shiver shook his crooked frame, and for a moment it seemed as if he would fall to the ground. Only for an instant. Then, with a savage toss of the head that sent his snake-like locks fluttering, he turned to George Penny, hoarsely muttering:

"Look! are the clouds gathering? Is there any signs of coming rain? Tell me—tell me—quick!"

"There's not even a cloud to be seen in the heavens," responded the sport, holding himself on the alert, startled, almost scared by that peculiar address and manner.

"Then—it *must* rain!" with growing hoarseness, his one eye rolling wildly, a hairy hand clutching at his throat, then shifting to his temples with fierce pressure. "Only a cool shower can put out this infernal fire! Whistle—*whistle*, curse ye!" with a savage snarl, bits of foam beginning to fleck his lips and dot his mustaches. "Whistle for rain—rain in showers and sheets and torrents! Whistle for rain until—until—ah!"

His hoarse, choking speech changed to a wild, maniacal shriek. He flung aloft his arms, his muscular fingers closing and opening, his head bending back until his wildly rolling eye was turned toward the rose-tinted heavens, his deformed body quivering and trembling as with a violent ague fit.

George Penny sprang past the maniac to the side of the pale and trembling maiden, revolver in hand, ready to use it if worst came to worst, while the Mormons, with ejaculations of terror, shrunk away, stopped only by the precipice.

But as that wild shriek pierced the air, a little man in gray, followed closely by half a score of armed men, dashed out from the pass, running at top speed toward the spot. And as Daddy Dead-Eye, with one gurgling, choking, horrible cry, fell prone upon his face, the little man in gray clothes leaped across his writhing body.

"Grab him, you fellows!" he cried, sharply, before turning to the startled group beyond. "I'll see that you don't come to hurt, as long as you behave yourselves, strangers. It's nothing out of the common; he gets that way every once in a little while!"

Several stout fellows fastened upon the prostrate monarch, holding him so that he could do himself no injury as he struggled, then looked toward the little man in gray as though for further instructions.

"You know what to do and how to do it. I'll just—"

Even as he spoke Daddy Dead-Eye, with marvelous power, flung off those hampering hands, sending the stout fellows reeling away on every side as he leaped to his feet. A screeching laugh came from his froth-tinged lips, and his one eye flamed like living fire in the gathering twilight as he thundered:

"What? a revolt against your king? Ye snarling curs! dare ye show your teeth to me? And you—Perley Grace—you turn against me?"

From maniacal rage to reproachful surprise as his wild stare rested for an instant on the face and figure of the little man in gray. One hand

had half-drawn a pistol from its sheath, but he paused, seemingly unnerved by surprise.

Perley Grace, pale but steel-nerved, faced the madman firmly, making a covert signal for the instruction of the men who were scrambling to their feet. And there was no sign of fear in his voice as he spoke:

"I'm only obeying orders, Daddy. If that's a crime, you haven't forgotten how to handle your gun; blow me through—but don't mix up others with me if you can help it."

The deformed hardly appeared to comprehend these words, even if he heard them all. Before Perley Grace ended, he turned slowly around, his wild eye roving from figure to figure, his muscular fingers still gripping the butt of his revolver.

Perley Grace cast a swift look toward George Penny, muttering:

"Move the girl back a bit, pardner, will you? Not that the boss would hurt a hair of her head of his own will, but when the devil gets inside his brain, like this, he sometimes jest nat'ally turns loose! Go easy—don't fetch back his eye too hasty! I'll try to kiver you—all eyes open, ye hear?"

George Penny had already thrown his left arm about the waist of the trembling maiden, his right hand armed and ready to shoot down the madman in case of necessity. Now, slowly, little by little, keeping his own body as a living shield between Vesta Massey and Daddy Dead-Eye, he increased that distance by degrees. But, cautiously as he moved, the deformed giant noticed his actions, and with a howl of rage he drew his revolver and leveled it, thundering:

"Hold! drop that lady! I've sworn to protect her, and—"

Perley Grace recognized death in his wildly glaring eye, and leaped forward, clapping his hand over the grim muzzle as he tried out:

"It's all right, Daddy! I say it—an' you know you kin trust to my word. It's all right—he'll fetch her back ag'in!"

CHAPTER X.

FINGER-RING JOHNNY.

SWIFTLY, recklessly even for one who had gained the name of being an unusually daring rider, Lightning Kate swept around the curve in the mountain trail that shut her out of sight of Daddy Dead-Eye and those upon whom he seemed determined to force the hospitalities of Dew Drop.

Here, as on the other side of the level tongue extending opposite the pass, the trail narrowed until there was scant room for two horsemen to pass by close crowding and gingerly steps. But Lightning Kate, her reins drooping, her armed heel viciously stabbing the quivering flanks of her snorting steed, frightened by this unaccustomed savageness, gave her danger not a thought. At any moment her fluttering habit might catch on one of the many projecting points and spurs of rock in the wall at her left hand, gaining firm enough hold to destroy her balance or that of her racing steed. Or the animal himself might tread on a loose stone, when a stumble would result in almost certain death, with that dizzy depth lying so near their right hand.

But for once, Lightning Kate gave no thought or heed to these.

"He here! Face to face! Who is he hunting?" she muttered, in a tone strangely unmusical for the Queen of Dew Drop, and there was something close akin to terror in her great black eyes as she rode rapidly along the narrow trail.

"I've seen him often—in my dreams—but never like this! His hands empty, and a smile upon his lips! What does it mean? What brought him here to-day? What—who was that girl?"

Her voice took on a double sharpness at that, and her gloved hands wrenched at the reins until the black steed reared up and settled back on its haunches, just as we have seen it do once before that evening. And Lightning Kate turned in her saddle with a fiery backward glance, as though she longed to return to solve the fierce suspicion which had found such sudden birth in her brain.

Only for a single breath. Then she forced a laugh, a touch of biting scorn in her muttered tones:

"Bah! you fool! What right have you to kick, Kate Leclair? What is it to you if it be even so? What if it suits him to carry an entire harem with him in his wanderings? Nothing—worse than nothing! And yet—if I knew that little fool was his new mate, I'd turn back to lay her out—too cold!"

Viciously enough came those concluding words, but they seemed to relieve the beautiful amazon in no small degree. Her lips parted in a clear, ringing laugh, and she gave her black steed its head once more. Her face turned backward as he moved on, and there was far more earnestness than mockery in her words as she flung them back:

"Tighten your grip, good Daddy Dead-Eye! Close your hairy paws until you can feel the life oozing out between your fingers! Squeeze him until there's not even the ghost of a vengeful feeling left inside his skin—and I'll honor any draft you care to make on yours truly!"

It may have been that this little outburst cleared her brain, or possibly Lightning Kate, reckless, fearless though she had so often shown herself, was not yet ready for death in that shape, for when the black steed carried her to the point where the narrow trail left the level and abruptly curved over the rocky wall, pitching downward at a perilous slope, she seemed once more her old self, with a clear head and steel-like nerves.

The gallant black seemed to feel this, and moved along with more confidence, sure-footed almost as a mountain goat. And Lightning Kate aided him with the reins, as only a practiced rough-rider can at times, until the steep descent was accomplished and the comparative level lay before them, with a portion of Dew Drop in sight.

Lightning Kate seemed in no particular haste, just then. Her spur remained unused. The reins lay swaying across the sable neck. She bent forward in the saddle until an elbow touched her curved knee. Thumb and finger nervously pinched her red-ripe lip, her jetty brows contracted over the dark eyes that stared at vacancy ahead.

She was thinking—going over in her mind all that had transpired up on the pointed plateau—and it was easy to guess how unwelcome those thoughts were.

"I knew the day would come, *must* come, but I was not ready for it just now!" she muttered, unconsciously shaping some of her thoughts in audible tones. "Twice came word that he was dead, but I laughed at the tidings, for I knew better. I knew that he would never croak while—until—"

She started as if at the sound of her own voice. She stared almost wildly about her for a single breath, then gave a short, forced laugh at her own weakness.

"I've got to taper off, I reckon!" she muttered, gathering up her reins and straightening in her saddle. "If the drug rattles me so easy, I've got to shake it. For who plays against George Penny needs all the nerve he or she can beg, borrow or steal!"

A touch of the spur sent her good horse ahead at an easy lope which lasted until more than half-way through Dew Drop; no great distance, however, for the place was by no means overgrown.

Those clattering hoofs attracted more than one pair of admiring eyes through the settling night, but Lightning Kate looked straight ahead, seemingly unconscious of all. Yet she recognized a slender form leaning in a doorway beneath a mellow red light, while still a goodly distance off, and as she rode past, her right hand made a slight gesture in that direction which brought the foppish figure from the door with an eager step.

But Lightning Kate did not pause, did not even turn her face in that direction, riding on until almost at the further edge of Dew Drop before drawing rein. This she finally did in front of a single-story frame building, standing apart from all others, dark and silent.

A short, fat, splay-footed negro shambled forward from the darkness as Lightning Kate reined in and sprang lightly from the saddle; but his hurried movement seemed far too slow to please the amazon, whose little whip whistled through the air to raise a tiny cloud of dust from the shrinking shoulders of the black.

"Lively, you black snail! How dare you keep me waiting?" and again the whip descended as Lightning Kate passed him by, to enter the house.

"Gee-who! dat's mighty keen, fo' suah!" growled the squat hostler with an uneasy shake of his tingling shoulders. "All fo' nuffin—but who's keerin'? De mo' lick, de mo' yaller ta'm she spread on! Dis be wuff mo' dollah dan one, when Ma'am Kate come back to good humor ag'in. She hit mighty hard, but she pay mighty lib'al, too!"

Lightning Kate entered the building, striking a light and throwing herself into a chair without removing even her plumed turban. She seemed to be expecting some one, from the impatient manner in which her dark eyes glanced toward the nearly closed door.

Her patience was not long tested. A light, hurried footfall met her ear, and a moment later a gentle tapping sounded at the door.

"Come in, can't you?" she cried sharply, a frown flitting over her darkly beautiful face. "Would I leave the door ajar unless I was waiting for you?"

The door opened, then closed behind the slender figure which we have already noticed beneath the red lamp of the Alhambra, and one of Dew Drop's noted characters stood softly smiling before Queen Kate.

Barely up to the average height of his sex, slender, graceful, effeminate in looks. Garbed in fine material, cut and made after a manner hardly to be expected in such a semi-barbarous region, this personage would not have seemed out of place in the inner circles of dude-dom.

"A blonde and curled darling," was this John Mack, with his golden hair, his yellow whiskers which left his dimpled chin and his baby-red lips open to view, with his milk-and-roses complexion, his mild blue eyes and single glass.

As he doffed his shining silk tile, the lamp-light gleamed across his jeweled fingers and told why the irreverent of Dew Drop had dubbed the dainty little sport "Finger-ring Johnny."

"You are late this evening, Queen Kate," he said, his tones soft and musical, his eyes betraying the passionate love with which this imperious creature had inspired him. "I have worried about you for two hours past—I feared you had come to grief in some manner. If you would only listen to me—if you would only forgo these long rides, or, at least, permit me to bear you company?"

A flush crept into his face as Lightning Kate laughed mockingly, contemptuously as it seemed, her black eyes measuring him from crown to sole as she uttered:

"With you as escort, Baby? A cock-sparrow watching over a she eagle? That would be a gay and gallant spectacle—I don't think!"

Then, abruptly growing serious, she added:

"I wonder what you would have done if you had been with me to-day, Johnny? I wonder if you would have—well, run away, as I did!"

"From what? A ghost?" half-smiled the dainty little sport as he dropped into a chair opposite the faro queen.

"If you spell ghost with the same letters that you do devil—yes! Johnny, it's come, at last! I've seen him—George Penny!"

She flung the words at him, leaning forward, her black eyes taking on a ruddy tinge as they fastened upon the little sport's face. To an on-looker, it would seem as though she expected to see him start and flinch; but if so, she was agreeably disappointed.

Finger-ring Johnny waited, as though to make sure she was through, his big blue eyes placid, his baby-face unmoved in the slightest. And when he did speak, it was with the same easy, subdued tones:

"I wish I had been with you, Kate. It must have been annoying."

A deep, dark flush leaped into the woman's face, though she knew well enough that Finger-ring Johnny had not intended to sting her. And knowing this, she crushed down her anger, to say:

"Maybe it's just as well that you were not not, Baby. The fellow had all his teeth drawn, and his hands plenty full, as it was. But let me tell you how it all came about."

Rapidly she spoke, Finger-ring Johnny listened in perfect silence to her account of that strange and unexpected meeting on the pointed plateau up the mountains.

"As I met him face to face—as I recognized his face, despite the blood that marked it—a hand of ice seemed to grip my heart so tightly as to check its pulsations! I took him for the ghost you hinted at, a bit ago, until I caught the voice of Daddy Dead-Eye bidding me turn him back. Then—how I held my hand when I covered him with this little gun," tapping the pearl-hafted revolver at her waist, "I'll never tell you!"

"I'm glad you saved your powder, Kate," murmured the little sport.

"And when he turned his back upon me, with that infernally cool and insolent smile of his!" panted the woman, unheeding his remark in her almost savage excitement. "When I had him covered—wholly at my mercy—when it needed but a slight contraction of my finger to end it all! Yet—I let the chance go unimproved! I forced him back to that scar-faced monster, then rode away, as if a thousand devils were chasing me!"

"And you reckon he'll come to Dew Drop?"

Without replying at once, Lightning Kate sprang to her feet. Finger-ring Johnny also arose. Her gloved hands rested on his shoulders, her proud head bent until she could gaze fairly, steadily into his eyes.

"John Mack, how much do you love me?"

"It would take years to tell you with my clumsy tongue, Kate," was the simple, earnest response. "I'd rather try to show you by my actions, only one life is not half long enough."

Lightning Kate pushed him from her, laughing lightly as she sunk back into the seat she had so abruptly vacated. And as Finger-ring Johnny opened his coat, handling his pistols, she asked:

"What are you going to do, Baby? Surely—not kill him?"

"Offer him satisfaction, of course," with a faint smile.

CHAPTER XI.

FILLING DADDY DEAD-EYE'S BOOTS.

WITH his hand covering the muzzle of the pistol held by the Despot of Dew Drop, meeting his lurid glare unflinchingly, Perley Grace cried out in sharp reproach:

"Shoot, Daddy Dead-Eye, if you can believe that this hand was ever raised against you save for your own good. Pull trigger if you doubt me—if you can think I'd chip in without good cause!"

For a brief space their eyes met. For a single breath the empty hand of the madman, its fingers crooked like the claws of an eagle, quivered as though about to shoot out and close upon the throat of him who dared step between him and his prey.

But then came a change, abrupt as it was effective.

Daddy Dead-Eye gave a choking groan. His grip relaxed, and the revolver fell into the hand of his lieutenant. He swayed dizzily, both hands lifting to his discolored temples, and he would have fallen headlong on the rocks, only for the prompt action of the little man in gray.

Hastily lowering the hammer and dropping the pistol, he caught the sinking form of the giant in his arms, pantingly crying:

"Here, you clumsy critters! Steady—carefully! So!"

The deformed body was lowered to the ground, and as that frightful fit once more showed its power, half a dozen stout fellows sought to keep the victim from injuring himself. Pale, stern, glowing-eyed, Perley Grace stood by, watching, waiting. Then he gave a deep breath of relief as those furious, blind struggles suddenly came to an end.

"I's over for now," he muttered, brushing a hand across his forehead. "You know what to do next, without me. I've got to step into his shoes until he comes back, I reckon."

The men lifted the body of the deformed between them, only its weight troubling them. There was no sign of life; not a voluntary motion. They might have been carrying a corpse, for all the watchers could say to the contrary.

"I'm mighty sorry, for your sake, ma'am," said Perley Grace, doffing his hat with rude politeness as he turned toward Vesta Massey, a faint smile lighting up his thin, fallow face for an instant. "It's an ugly sight for them as ain't used to sech-like doin's, an' I'd give a heap of it hadn't come on him so soon. I was afraid of it, though!"

"Then why let such a character run loose?" sternly demanded Penny, lowering his protecting and supporting arm as he felt Vesta draw back. "If you knew he was subject to such crazy spells, why haven't you shut him up—or buried him, for that matter?"

Before Perley Grace could answer, though his lips parted promptly enough, Wallace Massey made a move, springing to the side of the maiden, pushing her apart from the wandering sport before either could divine his intentions. And with drawn pistol he menaced the young man, grating:

"We've had enough foolishness, and this is straight business. I've got what I came so far after, and I'll hold fast to it. She's my runaway child, and I'm going to take her back with me—living if I can, dead if I must!"

"Never alive!" panted Vesta, striving to break from his grasp. "I am not your child—you are no father of mine!"

"Her mind is unsettled, gentlemen," hurriedly chimed in Eli Prosser, stepping forward, his broad face flushed redly, his little eyes glowing with eager interest. "Don't mind her—don't pay any attention to her wild ravings. I swear to you that this is her father!"

"And I swear to you both that I'll waste a bullet on each villain of you, unless you sing smaller!" sharply cried George Penny, a thrust of his left hand sending the stout Mormon staggering back, while his other, clasping the butt of a revolver, anticipated Wallace Massey by a full second. "Look in this, my friend, and read what I've got to say to you, if you don't unhand that young lady!"

Massey shrunk visibly, yet kept his hold on Vesta.

"Even if you murder me, I'll keep—"

"I'll kill the first to burn powder, gents!" sharply cried Perley Grace, covering the two men most prominent as he uttered a shrill whistle which found a prompt echo from near the mouth of the pass. "And I'll tell these honest lads to stretch their lariats with the rest of you, if you don't simmer down and come to Limerick!"

Instinctively the angry men glanced in the direction from whence came the hurried trampling of feet, to distinguish through the growing shades a full dozen of armed men running to answer that signal. And lowering his pistols, Perley Grace laughed hardily:

"I'm talking by the book, as you can see for yourselves, gents. I'm giving you Gospel, free of charge. Now, go on with your bloody murdering if you still feel in the mood!"

George Penny lowered his weapon, with something like a smile shadowing his lips. Though the girl might not go free, still any other guard was preferable to that of this brutal father.

Wallace Massey was not near so content. He had hoped that, with Daddy Dead-Eye out of the way, he could bluff his way through without much actual trouble. But matters began to look mighty dubious!

"You've no right to threaten me," he growled, surlily, still fighting against hope. "This girl is my daughter. She ran away from my home without cause or provocation. Who dares say I've no right to take her back again?"

"Well, I'm not saying just that," deliberately responded Perley Grace. "I'm not setting myself up as a judge, far's that goes. All I know, or care to know, is that the boss said you were all to go down to Dew Drop, to stay until he made up his mind just what to do with you.

And what Daddy Dead-Eye says goes as it lays, you want to understand!"

"I protest against any such vile outrage!"

"Nobody's hinderin' of ye, I reckon," with a short, dry laugh. "All the same, stranger, law is law, and all the law I know is the will of my boss. He said go to Dew Drop, and go you've got to! You kin choose the way you like best: warm or cold. I reckon we kin keep your carcass from spoiling too bad, if we have to take you that way."

The angry Mormon drew back with a shiver, turning a sickly yellow. There was a terribly matter-of-fact sound to this dry observation, and he began to see that he had gained precious little by the substitution of Perley Grace for Daddy Dead-Eye.

What he lost, the maiden seemed to gain. There was an eager, almost hopeful light in her dark eyes as she drew a little nearer the man.

"You will not permit him to take me, dear sir? I swear to you that he is not my father—that he has no claim, legal or moral, over me!"

"I reckon he's got all he wants to take care o' himself, ma'am," grimly responded the little man in gray.

"And I may go? You will permit me to go to— Oh, sir!" clasping her hands as she sunk to her knees before the man. "If you knew—if I only dared tell you how much depends on my escape! Pray let me go, and I'll bless you in my prayers while life endures!"

"If you can resist that, you're more devil than man!" sharply uttered George Penny.

But Perley Grace paid him no attention. His face may have turned a bit paler than usual, though that would have been no easy task, but his tones were cold and hard as he stooped to lift the maiden to her feet, sobbing, trembling between fear and hope.

"Ef it was only me, I'd jump at the offer, ma'am, but thar's the boss to think of. He said you must go down to Dew Drop, an' it ain't fer me to go ag'in' his will."

"Then—God have mercy on poor mother!" gasped Vesta, growing limp and nerveless as her last hope vanished.

Cold and hard, George Penny watched the little man as he gently rested the maiden against a bowlder. When he spoke, his voice was low and even, but underneath lay a deadly intensity:

"I'll bear you in mind, little fellow. And when we can meet on anything like equal footing, I'll recall this scene to your memory."

"Let it go at that, then," was the cold, careless retort. "You'll hev the freedom of Dew Drop for a few days, unless something should happen through your own bull-headedness. I live down thar. Anybody can tell you where I hang out after business hours. Ef you see fit to make me a call—well, ef you don't go away satisfied, it'll most like be because you've fergot how to walk on your own feet."

Without waiting for a reply, Perley Grace turned toward the Mormons, who had gathered together, sullen but watchful. They dared make no open move with so many watchful eyes upon them. Past experience told them how ready to act were these stout fellows who came and went at the slightest beck or nod of the Despot of Dew Drop.

True, Daddy Dead-Eye was out of the way; out of sight, as well, thanks to the shades of night which were now falling thickly; but he had left one who could fairly fill his boots, despite the great difference in size.

"You see how it is, gents," coldly uttered Perley Grace, his keen gray eyes roving swiftly from face to face as he added: "I'm bound to treat you all alike. The boss said go to Dew Drop, and that settles it so fur's I'm consarned. You've got to go, an' it lays with you jest how you'd rather make the trip."

"We've got our choice, just so we decide on what you've marked out, that means?" snapped Wallace Massey.

"Well, I didn't think o' puttin' it that way," laughed Grace. "What I did mean was that you could ride your own critters, hand an' foot free, or we'd tie you on ef you'd rather make the trip so."

"Either way we're prisoners, though!"

"Daddy Dead-Eye said you was to be his guests, but ef you like the other name best, I'm not kickin'."

Wallace Massey showed his teeth viciously as he growled:

"You're even worse than that crazy devil—and that's needless! Do you mean to keep us captive until he comes back to his senses?"

"That's 'bout the size of it, I reckon."

"What if he never recovers? What if he dies in that horrible fit? How then?" cut in George Penny, abruptly.

Perley Grace hesitated a little before answering.

"That's lookin' funder ahead than I keer to try, stranger. I don't reckon he'll go off that way. But ef he should—"

"Well? If he should?" frowned Massey.

"Time enough to settle what comes after. I ain't borrowin' trouble ahead o' time. Fetch up the critters, lads!" cried Grace, turning away as though weary of such persistent questioning.

But George Penny stepped to his side, gently tapping an arm.

"I hate to crowd you, pardner, but naturally I feel an interest in this matter. From what you've said, I take it that this Daddy Dead-Eye, as you call him, is subject to these spells?"

"Well, I've knowed him to hev 'em afore this," shortly.

"And how long, on an average, do they last? In other words, if all goes well with the handsome creature, when may we expect to behold the light of his countenance?"

"Any time inside of a week. He may come 'round afore mornin', or he may stick it out fer a full week. I've knowed him to be that long under the 'fluence, anyway."

Perley Grace turned away with a frown, and George Penny pressed him no closer. It was sorry comfort! And yet—unless they were to be actually treated as prisoners; unless they were kept bound, or confined closely—this absence of Daddy Dead-Eye might turn out to be a blessing rather than a curse!

Thinking thus, George Penny moved closer to the side of Vesta, more to keep Wallace Massey away than aught else. He said nothing, however, instinctively feeling how poor and inadequate would be any words of comfort he could whisper, under the present circumstances.

Perley Grace was obeyed quite as promptly as though he was the Despot of Dew Drop himself, and in a very few minutes the horses taken from the Mormons were brought up, together with the steed which Penny had left behind while investigating the alarm on the point. And in another five minutes all were in the saddle, Vesta riding behind George, and following the lead of Perley Grace, bound for Dew Drop.

CHAPTER XII.

LINK LOPER TAKES A WALK.

"If you can't explain it, we needn't try!"

The speaker was Eli Prosser, and his little eyes which, half-sullen, half-suspicious, noted the deepening flush on the face of his nearest companion, Wallace Massey.

"What do you mean by that? You've seen and heard as much as I. And you were just as quick, to knuckle, too!"

Massey showed his teeth a bit, not exactly liking the manner in which the stout Mormon spoke and acted; but the coming of misfortune clearly had not sweetened the temper of the bride-hunter from Deseret.

"If my claim had been as sound as yours, I'd have held on until my teeth came out by the roots! When you backed, what else remained for me? Nothing, of course. For how did I know what your real reasons were? How could I tell it was not a put-up job between you and that thing of grace and beauty on two legs—Daddy Dead-Eye, as he calls himself."

Wallace Massey stared, open-eyed, at the surly Mormon.

"Once more, Eli, what are you trying to get through you?"

"Who is that ugly devil? When and where have you met him before?"

"I never met him before—I hope I'll never meet him again!"

A puzzled light came into those suspicious eyes, for even he could not doubt the entire sincerity of one who spoke thus; not even Wallace Massey was capable of counterfeiting that shiver of mingled hatred, fear and disgust brought up by this mention of the giant deformed.

"Then there's more behind for us to find out," Prosser muttered, pushing his pendulous lips between his yellow teeth, gnawing it sharply as he stared past his companions at vacancy. "For I'll lay my head that Daddy Dead-Eye knows more of you than you claim to know of him. I saw it in that infernally keen eye of his. If not, what made him hang on to us all?"

"'Twasn't the hangin' on that upset me nigh so much as the way he let go!" ventured Link Loper, with a sickly grin from his corner. "Ef I hed all the prayers that run through the head o' me, back thar, when I was makin' that turn-over trip down to that blessed tree-top, I jest reckon I could fit out every gospel sharp 'twixt the two ponds with a round dozen, an' hev a wagon load left over fer fam'ly use. Waal, yas!"

Massey only scowled at this interruption. He seemed far more interested in solving the doubts awakened by Eli Prosser.

"The fellow is crazy—crazy as a bed-bug! That is the only way in which I can at all explain his conduct. As for what you hint at, I can't think that way. Who could ever forget such a face and figure? I'll expect it to haunt my dreams for the next six months!"

"If we have dreams," grimly muttered the other. "Dreams infer sleep, and to sleep, one needs the breath of life. Now—do you really expect to get out of this cursed snarl? If so, I envy your confiding trust in human nature! As for me—I'd weigh down the strongest arm in all Dew Drop with minted gold, if that arm's owner would ensure my leaving town, sound in wind and limb!"

Link Loper visibly pricked up his ears at this, looking more like his old self than he had at any time since Daddy Dead-Eye tossed him

from the plateau to what seemed almost certain death.

"I hain't got his muskles," with a little shiver as he cast an involuntary glance over his shoulder, "but I reckon I'd hold up more'n one squar' drunk afore chokin' off the stream o' yaller-boys! An' ef you hain't—ef you really mean it, boss, why—"

With his little eyes glowing, his heavy features showing how great was his interest, Eli Prosser leaned toward the bony spy, muttering:

"Can it be done? Is there even the ghost of a chance of getting out of this hole with the girl?"

Link Loper gave a half-snort at this, the avaricious gleam fading from his deep-sunken eyes.

"A gal hain't a man, ye want to know, boss. Nur I wasn't thinkin' o' any sech when I chipped in. Nur you didn't say nothin'—"

"I say it now, then!" with growing interest. "I'll pay your own price, be it little or big, if you can hatch up a way to get us safely outside of this infernal trap!"

"It'll be mighty resky, even ef it kin be done at all."

"That goes without saying, but men don't offer big pay for little jobs. If any man could make the raffle, I wouldn't bother with you," the stout Mormon said, bluntly.

"It might be done—it may be on the boards, after all!" muttered Wallace Massey, with growing interest as he listened. "At all events, it's well worth making a try for it."

Link Loper shook his head, dubiously.

"It's mighty easy to talk," he muttered, rasping his bony chin with bonier fingers. "Ef it was only one man—or two, at the outside—that'd be different. But you're talkin' 'bout takin' in the hull outfit; an' the little honey-bird, too! Thar's whar the rub'd come toughest, don't ye see? How be we to git at her fu'st thing?"

"Put that all in your bill, Link, and don't stop to grumble until you're dead sure there's nothing more profitable in sight," impatiently cut in Eli Prosser. "Nobody's idiot enough to think it will all be smooth sailing. There's bound to be trouble and risk, but will it come any easier if we hold on until that crooked devil comes back to run the camp? Would you rather buck against him than the little fellow?"

"And, since I come to think it all over," added Wallace Massey, his face far more cheerful than a few minutes earlier in the evening, "I begin to believe that our main, if not only, difficulty will lie in stopping the mouth of the girl. She'd kick up a row rather than go with us, of course, but if we can manage that, I hardly think anybody else'll take the trouble to stand in our way. If so—if they really wanted to hold us here for that crooked fiend—would they show so much carelessness? Not a bit of it! They'd tie us up heels and neck, or else put an armed guard over us."

Link Loper grinned slightly, though still plainly doubting.

"The critter is little, but he ain't no fool, I don't reckon. Mebbe he reckons we wouldn't make a break 'bout the little lady. Mebbe—"

"I won't, for one," doggedly growled Prosser, his little eyes snapping with venom. "If only for spite, I'll win and wear her!"

"And I want to find out where she left that sweet wife of mine, more than all else!" laughed Wallace Massey.

There was little real in that laugh. Alone with his tools, whom he felt he could trust with a full knowledge of his wickedness, the Mormon cast aside all masks and showed his evil nature in all its nakedness.

"Waal, the little cuss didn't say none o' us wasn't to step outside to fill the lungs o' us with fresh air, anyway," grinned the bony spy, rising from his seat and opening the door of the little cabin to which they had been conducted by Perley Grace. "Ef I should run up ag'in' a snag, they can't do no wuss then run me in as a stray!"

Under the guidance of Perley Grace, the little company had reached the mining town of Dew Drop, over the same trail which we saw Lightning Kate traverse a little earlier in the evening.

With armed men in front and rear, ready to obey without hesitation the commands of the little man who had so promptly stepped into the boots of Daddy Dead-Eye, not even Wallace Massey dared to object or grumble further. In silence the "guests" rode along. In equal silence Perley Grace escorted them safely within the confines of Dew Drop.

A signal brought the armed escort to a halt, just at the edge of town, when the little man in gray spoke:

"You gents kin take your choice; put up at the hotel, or hev a cabin to your own hook, with grub and all such needs furnished you free o' charge. As fer the young lady, I reckon she'll be better suited ef she kin see the face of a woman nigh to hand, an' she'll go to my wife. This is the best I kin do, until Daddy Dead-Eye comes back to run matters in his own way."

There was a brief silence, broken at last by George Penny.

"I'm easy to suit. If these gentlemen put up

at the tavern, I'll take the cabin. If they prefer setting up housekeeping, the hotel is plenty good enough for me!"

Wallace Massey and Eli Prosser interchanged quick glances, and then the chief Mormon decided in favor of the cabin. Without a word further Perley Grace escorted them to an unoccupied building, bidding a couple of his men attend to their wants, then turning away with Vesta Massey still riding behind George Penny.

Passing partly through the scattered town, he halted before a neat little building, the open door of which was pretty well filled by the figure of a kindly-faced, buxom woman of middle age. Perley Grace offered to assist Vesta Massey from the horse, but she evaded him, gaining the side of the woman, giving a half sigh, half sob of relief as she gazed up into that kindly, honest face.

George Penny saw this, and the frown faded from his face. He leaned over in his saddle, one hand touching the arm of the little man.

"Treat her white, stranger! Treat her just as you'd like your wife treated in a similar box. If not—well, I'm never so busy that I can't find time to pay off my debts. And since I've chipped in, I'm playing for the lady as well as on my own hook. You sabe, friend?"

Perley Grace passed over the thinly veiled threat without notice.

"Jim'll show you the hotel, stranger, since you'd rather chance that than bunk in with the rest o' the outfit. He'll set you on your feet, by lettin' the old man know you're Daddy Dead-Eye's guest, so—"

"Am I to be favored with an armed body-guard?"

"Not unless you ax fer one," with a grim smile.

"Then let Jim hunt his own hole. I've a rare nose for a hashery, and when I can't foot my own bills, I've a mighty pretty style of running my cheek. Let Daddy Dead-Eye reserve his soup-tickets for the next tramp, will you?"

"Hev it that way ef it suits ye better," laughed Perley Grace, a motion of his hand sending off the last of his men. "Hope you'll be in a better humor the next time we run up ag'in' each other."

George Penny laughed lightly, turning his horse away, with a last glance toward Vesta Massey. But she was just disappearing within the house, under the ample wing of Mrs. Grace, and had apparently forgotten his very existence in her own troubles.

The men detailed by Perley Grace to attend on the wants of the six Mormons, faithfully performed their duty. Food, drink and bedding were supplied, and lights were furnished in goodly quantities. Then, without taking the trouble to say good-night, the men turned away, leaving the little company in uneasy doubt as to what was next on the programme.

The cabin was located by itself, not far from the edge of town furthest from the hills, and after listening in vain for sounds which might tell of armed guards, Wallace Massey had ventured just outside the door, looking in vain for any such disagreeable protection. If any such guards were placed, they kept well concealed.

It was this fact which led up to the talk already recorded, and which caused Link Loper to imagine escape from Dew Drop might be within the possibilities. But until Eli Prosser spoke of it, he had never once thought of such a thing as taking Vesta Massey with them in case of trying to escape.

Link Loper was nothing if not covetous. Gold was all the god he owned allegiance to, and thought he felt a twinge of fear as he recalled how narrowly he had escaped death but a few hours earlier, for going against the will of the Despot of Dew Drop, lust of gold now urged him to see what could be accomplished.

"Ef I find out we kin crawl through camp," he said, before leaving the cabin; "'bout runnin' chuck-up ag'in' too durn many snags, why then'll be time enough fer to lay plans to snake the little lady out o' the snare, as well. Ef I can't crawl through, then they ain't no use thinkin' furdur 'bout gittin' her off!"

"I'll never leave her behind!" frowned Eli Prosser.

"And I'll stick it out just as firm, unless I can carry her secret with me!" chimed in Wallace Massey. "I want my wife even more than I want the girl; and I'll have her, too!"

Link Loper had nothing to say on either matter, just then. He took a look at his weapons before leaving the cabin for the comparative darkness without, closing the door quickly behind him, lest the broad sheet of light should attract unwelcome attention to his movements.

Once outside, he slowly, keenly scanned the gloom 'round about, trying to discover whether or no the cabin was being watched by Daddy Dead-Eye's men. And while his eyes were thus occupied, his brain was steadily working.

"Ef it wasn't fer the honey-bird! Ef it was only jest us men-critters! That'd be heap easier, an' I wouldn't hev to think twicet 'bout the best way to git to work. It'd hev to be a clean steal, an' slick dodgin'. But this ain't that. She wouldn't go of her own will—nary! We'd hev

to tote her, an' a body cain't do that slick enough to count big on crawlin'!"

He crept along in the densest shadows until at a fair distance from the cabin to which Perley Grace had consigned them, then drew his tall, gaunt figure erect, his keen eyes still busily roving about.

"Ef the boss nur the other cuss won't leave 'thout the little lady, I reckon I'll stick it out on the same line. Fer why: it's ducats I'm workin' fer, an' whar'll them come from ef I run away an' leave the pocketbook ahind? Ef they was any show to git what I've aint a'ready, that'd be different. I'd skin out, too, quick!" with a shiver of dread as he thought of Daddy Dead-Eye once more.

Better for him had he yielded to that dread, and sought safety in speed or flight.

Instead, Link Loper passed leisurely along through the town, keeping his eyes open and noting the movements of each figure revealed in town by the scattered lights, keeping himself in the gloom, though in such a manner as not to arouse suspicion of intentional skulking, in case any roving eyes should rest on his person.

"I could do it, too easy!" he muttered, with a grim smile playing about his thin lips as he drew nearer the edge of town without being halted or seeing anything like a guard. "But thar's the honey-bird; I want to make dead sure they ain't no watch stuck up, afore I try to run her off—'deed I jest does, now."

Higher and higher beat his hopes, and he was just on the point of calling the victory won, when a dark figure abruptly rose up in his path, sternly calling out:

"Down-brakes, stranger!"

"Who says so, an' fer why?" blurted out Link Loper, gruffly, his hopes rapidly sinking as he saw the shadow lift a terribly business-like rifle menacingly. "Cain't a feller take a walk ef he likes it?"

"Not this way, 'less you walk right through this bar'l," was the grimly facetious retort. "An' I'm turribly skeered you'd find a vein o' lead in your way— Wall, now, I jest do, stranger!"

"Wal, this is the durndest lay-out I ever struck."

"Shell I show ye a still durnder, pardner?" asked the guard, with the sound of a lifting hammer following his speech.

CHAPTER XIII.

A THIRSTY BUT WILLING PUMP.

AT about this same time, another of those so curiously introduced to Dew Drop, was making a little tour of investigation. This was George Penny, whose unexpected appearance had so shaken the nerves of the Faro Queen, Lightning Kate.

Although this was his first visit to the little mining-camp, the sport found little difficulty in ferreting out the hotel and securing a room, in the seclusion of which he quickly repaired the ugly marks left by that treacherous shot from Rank Hammond's rifle. Then, with a very natural curiosity stirring in his brain, he left the close, stuffy little chamber for the lower regions, to see how closely his movements were watched.

If any one about the hotel had heard of the affair on the plateau, or the part which this handsome young fellow had played in it, there was no sign given that such was the case.

Still, George Penny was not fully satisfied. Would Perley Grace have insisted on his company to town, simply in order to turn him free again, to do and to go whither he willed?

"We'll put it to the touch anyway," Penny muttered, with a cold glitter in his full blue eyes, as he lighted a cigar and leisurely passed out of the tavern to the street. "Funny if I can't smoke a spy, even in the dark. Nothing like knowing just what sort of a game one has to play before flying one's lead card!"

His experience was very much like that which Link Loper put on record, though stopping a little short of the latter, since he had no desire to leave Dew Drop that night at least. Though he strolled at will through the little town, taking no pains to conceal his movements or to avoid the red lights streaming across the street from open doors, George Penny met with no obstruction, saw nothing that could be construed into espial or guardianship.

"He's nobody's fool, that little rascal," with a short, grim laugh as this conclusion was reached. "What's the use of guarding a dozen points when one is amply sufficient? Ten to one, in long figures, that I could pick up a snag with my eyes shut, by just floating with the current that leads to his landing. As long as he can hold *her* in his grip, he needn't bother his head about the rest of the gang."

The handsome sport frowned a little as he gazed in the direction of Perley Grace's little cabin, but if he felt temptation drawing him that way, he quickly repelled it.

"She'd be the very last one to thank me for my trouble," with a forced smile curling his mustached lip. "She hadn't even a good-night to toss over her shoulder, and— Well, what of it?" with an impatient shake of his shapely shoulders as he turned on his heel and headed for the nearest open door, from beyond which

came the sounds of good-humored, if rather boisterous revelry. "Isn't one woman enough for any hog?"

George Penny entered the saloon, seemingly moved by idle curiosity alone, though as a matter of course he patronized the bar in a modest manner, by way of paying his footing.

A few looks were cast toward him by the occupants, but none of Daddy Dead-Eye's body-guard were among them, and no one showed much curiosity concerning the handsome stranger. And after a brief survey of those faces, Penny took his departure.

In a similar quiet fashion he entered and left several other saloons, with much the same experience. In one only did he recognize a face which he had seen among the armed men who seemingly sprung from the solid earth at the wave of the giant deformed's hand, and then, before he could gain the fellow's side, he disappeared through the open door. George followed as quickly as he could, without giving rise to suspicion among the others, but he saw no more of the man.

"All right," he muttered, heading for another red light, further up the street. "Reckon I couldn't learn much from him, anyway. What I want is a professional soak; a fellow whose tongue will keep wagging as long as some one else supplies the oil; and right yonder's my meat, for a ducat!"

Even as he crossed the threshold George Penny noticed a ragged, dirty, disreputable fellow leaning across the bar, earnestly engaged in "buzzing" the white-aproned keeper behind the barrier.

"Some other evening, Larry," that official was uttering. "Say—when your bonanza comes to light!"

With a sweeping glance George Penny saw that the saloon was vacant save for those twain and himself, and feeling sure his real object could not be better guarded, he at once opened his batteries.

Filling his glass, he pushed the bottle over to the dull-eyed bummer, who had shrunk back a pace as he summed up the newcomer; he was not one whom a professional "beat" would choose to practice upon.

"Poison yourself, pardner," with affable carelessness. "I'm terrible thirsty, but I never could drink alone. Don't refuse, unless you want to drive me into an untimely grave!"

The barkeeper grinned, but the bummer was too much interested in seeing how much liquid poison he could pour into one glass to take offense at a trifle like that. And as he relinquished his glass when closely drained, he gave a reluctant sigh, murmuring:

"Don't reckon you want to hire a mighty capacious vessel to keep at your elbow as long as that lonesomeness lasts, stranger? Save hunting up a pardner to help ye drink, when thirst tackles ye too hard! An' ef them spells comes too mighty often, no 'bjection to takin' a dose o' 'metic stuff, to make room fer playin' it all over ag'in!"

George Penny laughed heartily, as though he had never heard a better jest, and declaring that it deserved another wetting, he made his way just a little unsteadily to one of the little round tables with which the saloon was supplied for card players, bidding the barkeeper supply them with liquor and cigars.

"You see, it's just like this," giving his blue eyes a look of owlish wisdom, detaining the barkeeper for an instant. "I'm a stranger in camp. I don't know how long I'll stay, but it can't do any harm to get posted. Come to anchor, and be sociable, can't you?"

"Some other time—business first, you understand?" hurriedly replied the official, as a couple of men entered the door. "Larry Pinkston's posted, and he'll—all right, gents!"

"I kin talk fer all two both on us," hurriedly put in the bummer, as George Penny glanced with a reproachful air after the retreating barkeeper. "I'll tell ye all the ins an' outs o' Dew Drop, jest as easy as fallin' off a wet log! I kin show ye the brakes an' jungles whar the tigers lay in wait, an' whar the elephunt browses too!"

"That's hearty!" nodded the sport, with renewed cordiality, pulling a handful of coin from his pocket and pushing a yellow piece across the table. "Say you bring a bottle. It'll save waiting for that poker on two feet, when our glasses run dry."

Larry Pinkston almost fell headlong in his haste to comply, licking his constitutionally dry lips, feeling as though his oft-boasted "bonanza" had at last come to light. It was not often he ran foul of "an angel" like this.

George Penny saw that he had not been mistaken in his judgment, and really caring little what the bummer might think, he wasted no further time in beating about the bush. The table he had chosen stood in the corner furthest from the bar, and though the saloon was not extensively patronized, it was never wholly free from customers, which guarded him from intrusion on the part of the keeper.

"You're posted, then?" he asked, as Larry Pinkston refilled his seat opposite, lovingly caressing his replenished glass. "An old resident-er I suppose?"

With a heavy sigh, the bummer shook his head to the last query.

"Not of Dew Drop, though I reckon I've picked up the ropes 'bout as well as ef I was born here. Time was when I had bottles to throw at the heads o' my friends, too, an' ef luck don't break her back afore she kin come cl'ar my way, I'll hev 'em ag'in—too, plenty!"

"Then the barkeep' yonder wasn't trying to crack a joke when he spoke about your bonanza?"

"He thought he was—durn him!" with an angry glance toward the bar. "But I'll show the critter! When I come into my own—an' it's a dead sure thing, ye want to know, boss! The fu'st thing I'll do when that time comes, is to buy the critter out, an' make him drink a hull jug o' the very wu'st p'izen he keeps—yes, sir!"

"I want to be nigh enough to see the fun!" laughed Penny, adding: "But now—what sort of man is this I've heard about: Daddy Dead-Eye, or some such outlandish title? Who is he? What is he? Where is he?"

Larry Pinkston suddenly grew sober, casting a swift glance about him as though dreading an unwelcome vision. The unhealthy flush perceptibly faded from his bloated face, and something close akin to awe stole into his bleared, bloodshot eyes.

But George Penny picked up the bottle and refilled his glass, making neck and rim click musically while doing so. He calculated shrewdly, for the thirsty bummer was not able to resist that sweet music, and as his fingers closed upon the glass, he muttered guardedly:

"Who is he? A big tin joss on wheels! What is he? Now you've got me right whar the wool's bin shaved off too tight fer ketchin' with a s'arch-warrant! But I do know this much: when he sneezes, all Dew Drop begins to wipe her nose! When he takes a drink, every sleeve in town hes to play napkin! An' ef he was ever to ketch the colic, they wouldn't be nigh 'nough doctors in the Territory fer to 'tend to the sick people in Dew Drop! They'd every durned one o' them fall to groanin' an' gruntin', wuss then green apples an' schoolboy mixed up!"

"A sort of chief, I reckon?" murmured the handsome sport.

"Take him in his own way, an' I don't reckon a camp ever knowed a bigger chief," nodded the bummer, soberly, still in that guarded voice which one assumes when talking on a dangerous subject.

"I heard some little talk about him while up-country, but I set the biggest part down as lies and half the remainder exaggeration," smiled Penny, leaning back in his chair and gazing with half-closed eyes through the curling wreaths of blue smoke.

"I don't know what you hearn," doggedly muttered Larry Pinkston, making free with the bottle. "All I know is what I tell ye. Daddy Dead-Eye is cock o' the walk in these parts. His word is law an' a gospel to all Dew Drop. He kin walk from one end to t'other an' never set his hoofs on the ground, ef he tuck a notion fer to bid the cits. lay down an' play carpet!"

"Then Dew Drop must have been born without a backbone!"

Larry Pinkston shrugged his shoulders significantly.

"I hope you won't go foolin' with the town, thinkin' that, pardner," he drily observed. "Daddy Dead-Eye is one thing, an' others is others. A common man kin easy pick up a row, ef he jest winks crooked whar the boys kin take the hint. Leave the joss out, an' I never run up ag'in a healthier town then this same Dew Drop, fer pure, unadulterated fun!"

"And in case a fellow should strut in front of this wonder?"

"That feller'd hev no more use fer good liker—sech as this! It'd be a vardiect o' clean suicide!"

"Then I'll do my monkeying about some other person," laughed the sport, lightly. "By the way—I heard some one say your wonder on two legs was—well, call it a little cracked in the upper story. How about that?"

Larry Pinkston cast a quick glance about him before whispering:

"Ef he ain't, then he's got the devil into him, sure! Mebbe you'll hev a chauce fer to jedge on that p'int your own self, 'fore long. Ef you do, don't be ashamed to run ef you cain't git out o' his way 'thout doin' of it, fer you'll hev plenty o' comp'ny! They ain't more'n one in all Dew Drop that wouldn't take to his heels the same way when Daddy Dead-Eye gits on a spell!"

"Then there is one gritty soul in Dew Drop," with a nod of grim approval. "Pray who may that be?"

"Lightning Kate, folks call her."

Not a muscle of the handsome sport's face altered at that name.

"Lightning Kate?" he echoed, with arching brows. "Who is she?"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE GODDESS OF THE ALHAMBRA.

LARRY PINKSTON laughed shortly, a smile causing his grayish beard to bristle still more than nature intended as he replied:

"Waal, it's plain enough that you wasn't lyin' when you said you was a stranger in town! Fer ef you wasn't, you'd know who Lightning Kate is, easy enough."

"I told you I wanted to get posted. If one bottle isn't enough, there's more behind the bar," smiled Penny, flipping the ashes from his half-smoked cigar.

Larry Pinkston held the bottle between his eyes and the light, and finding enough for another glass, at once decanted it. Nothing like making sure of a good thing, seemed to be his motto.

"Here's hopin' your stock o' curiosity'll last as long as my tongue kin wag!" he laughed, putting the vile stuff where no one else could "file a lien" upon it, without also attaching his person.

"Drink hearty, pard," laughed the sport. "As long as you don't try to fill me up on wind, I'll never grumble. And this Lightning Kate: who may she be?"

"One o' the features o' Dew Drop!" was the prompt response, but with a curious gleam in his bloodshot eyes that George Penny did not fail to notice and mentally record for remembrance in case of need. "Ef she was to disappear, it'd leave a hole so big Dew Drop couldn't fill it up inside a century!"

"Not a dime-museum freak? Not a fat woman, surely?"

Larry Pinkston burst into a laugh so hearty that the eyes of all in the saloon were attracted. He saw this, and with an eye to future drinks, at once calmed down, resuming his former low, confidential tones.

"Ef it was anybody but you—an' I never was treated more like a gentleman, ef I do say it to the face o' ye!—I'd give my boots ef Kate could hear them words!" he chuckled, rubbing his grimy paws raspingly together. "Good Lawd! fat woman! dime museum! How them black eyes o' her would snap an' spit fire!"

"I take it all back, and beg the lady's pardon for the slip. Of course she is a lady, despite her rather flashy title!"

"It ain't yours truly that's got a word to say ag'in' the lady part," quickly responded the bummer, his face growing sober and grave. "Fer one thing, I reckon she's plenty squar'. Fer another, she totes a couple o' guns, an' knows too mighty well how to pick the triggers. An' ef any funder was wanted, thar's Daddy Dead-Eye!"

"She plays queen to his king, then?" drawled the sport, carelessly.

"Waal, that ain't so easy answered," hesitated the bummer, his eyes regaining that curious look which the adventurer had already noted down for future reference in case of need. "But ef she don't, it ain't fer lack o' bein' able ef the notion tuck her. It ain't no mighty secret, as I knows on; anyway, you're payin' fer straight tips, an' I'm open to give 'em to you, fur's I know how."

"Which means so much: Lightning Kate is the one person in all Dew Drop who doesn't hev to knuckle when Daddy Dead-Eye says kneel! An' she's the only one that hes any real 'fluence over him when he gits to runnin' a muck, so to speak. Not that I've see'd it. He haint hed one o' his wild spells sence I struck camp. But I've hearn people tell how, one day, when he was splittin' things wide open, she faced him down as slick as you please, an' never let up her grip ontel he was back in his sober senses ag'in."

"What does she follow for a living? Any chance there for an enterprising young man, with one eye open to the main chance?" drawled the handsome sport, half laughing as he uttered the words.

"I don't reckon they is," slowly, his bleared eyes drooping, but not quick enough to conceal that peculiar gleam in their depths. "Fact is, I reckon she's married!"

"Not to Daddy Deady-Eye?"

Larry Pinkston laughed outright, though partly stifled the sound with one dirty paw to avoid attracting attention.

"Good Lawd!" he gasped, his bloated face turning fairly purple with his curious glee. "Ef she could only hear it all! Ef she could only know what mighty rich jokes she's a-losin' all this time!"

"Funny, isn't it?" drawled the sport, lazily, but with an echo underlying his tones that wrought an instantaneous change in the half-drunken bummer.

"Beg pardon, boss," he muttered, hastily. "But I couldn't help it, an' you'll know the reason why when you've took a look at the couple of 'em. It'd be beauty hitched onto the beast, fur's looks go, anyway. Outside o' that—waal, mebbe Kate wouldn't git the wu'st o' the barg'in, anyway!"

"The lady is single—or did you say she had a husband?"

"She's married—yes."

"And that husband? What sort of a fellow is he?"

"You mean Finger-ring Johnny, I reckon?" hesitated Pinkston, then adding hurriedly: "He's a daisy from Flowerbed!"

"A chief, then?"

Again Larry laughed. Somehow it seemed

as though this stranger sport was fated to arouse the risibles of the bummer that evening.

"Not much he ain't a chief!" with undisguised contempt in both face and tones. "He's a figger-head—nothin' more then that! Lightning Kate is boss, an' she don't make no bones 'bout lettin' the hui community know it, nuther!"

"That ought to be comfortable for Finger-ring Johnny!"

"He jest loves it all over!" laughed Pinkston. "Ef she was to lay him down an' use him fer a mud-mat, he'd bust his shell an' go flappin' up to glory through pure delight! Waal, now, he's jest that fur gone on the black-eyed darlin', fer dead sure, ef you'll take my word fer it!"

"If Finger-ring Johnny likes it, I'm not grumbling," purred Penny, a bright smile glowing behind the smoke curls. "Proceed, pard. Empty your budget, and then you can freeze onto another bottle of liquid delight to take the dryness off your talking tackle. What do the fair couple for a living? Or do they live on love and sweet breezes?"

"Run the Alhambra; or Lightning Kate does, I should say. The toniest shebang in all Dew Drop, by long odds! An' the biggest payin', too, ef I hain't lost my good guessin'."

"A saloon, of course?"

"With a tiger's den to the back of it," amended Pinkston. "You want to take a look at it afore you leave town, but ef you ain't well heeled, I wouldn't 'vise you to do much buckin'. Not but what it's run on the squar', so fur's I know," he hastily amended, "but with Lightning Kate an' her big black eyes on t'other side o' the lay-out, it takes a mighty old an' keen head to come off ahead o' the game."

"The lady deals, then?"

"Every night, as long's a dollar banter the bank. It's well wu'th while to waste an hour, jest to see how her white fingers kin coax the keards out o' the box! I go 'round thar my own self, jest fer that. I don't skeer the tiger so awful bad, fer good reasons," with a dry laugh as he tapped his empty pocket, "but mebbe the day'll come when I kin call the turn fer all they is in the bank! Mebbe?" with a sudden glow lighting up his bleared eyes. "Mebbe? It's bound to come, in time! The bonanza is waitin', an' I'll ketch on afore many more days! Sure!"

George Penny slightly shrugged his shoulders at this outburst. He began to doubt his former suspicions, and set it all down to bad whisky.

"And Finger-ring Johnny?" he persisted in the search of information. "What part does he play, since the queen does the dealing?"

"Waal, he sorter scatters himself 'round the place, keepin' a eye onto matters in general. A mild sort o' watch-dog, I reckon. Though," with an increase of thoughtfulness in both face and tones, "they do say he kin bite mighty sharp an' sudden an' deep ef they comes need of it, too! I ain't lyin', even ag'in' a scented little rip like him!"

Apparently George Penny had learned enough for his purpose. He flung away his cigar, rising from his seat with a yawn which was most admirable if counterfeited, saying:

"I'm your debtor, pard. Reckon I've heard enough to serve for one lesson, and so I'll hunt my bunk to let it soak thoroughly into my memory. Hope I'll see you again. And to have an excuse, I'll only pay you half your earnings down," with a low laugh as he dropped a gold coin on the table before the astonished and delighted bummer.

Larry Pinkston "froze onto" the money with almost painful eagerness, and before he could utter his thanks or suggest another place of meeting, the handsome, free-handed sport had left him and the saloon.

"Ef he ain't an angel, then I want to know!" muttered Larry, pocketing the coin, hastily draining the bottle, then starting for the door.

"Hunt his bunk, is it? Wants to let my sober facts go simmer in his brain, eh? Waal, ef that's so, I'll never make a guess ag'in!" with a low chuckle as he passed out of the saloon, catching sight of George Penny moving leisurely up the street. "He played it mighty slick, but didn't I see in the two eyes o' him? Didn't I say to myself jest then that he wasn't hearin' o' Lightning Kate fer the fu'st time? An' don't I know right whar he'll fetch up? In the Alhambra, for this blessed ducat!"

CHAPTER XV.

A BEAUTIFUL TIGRESS.

"AND that's the den of my black-eyed tigress, is it?"

There was nothing very pretentious about the building opposite which George Penny came to a halt, shortly after, as he supposed, "shaking" the disreputable looking bummer, Larry Pinkston. Above the door hung a large lamp of red glass, with "The Alhambra" painted on the glob in plain black letters. There was a wide window on each side of the entrance, where might be read in large letters the same legend, by the bright light which came from beyond the glass.

Back among the shadows lining the street, Larry Pinkston gave a low whistle of suspicious wonder as he saw how direct the sport made his way to the place, but he was mistaken in his doubts. Penny had noticed the sign during his

earlier stroll, though he had not ventured inside the place at the time.

"Wonder if the lady will be expecting me to drop in, after a social fashion?" and a faint smile lit up the man's face, and his big eyes seemed to throw back the red light from across the way. "Twould be a thousand pities to keep her waiting—to so bitterly disappoint the beautiful darling! And yet—bah!" with a sharp shrug of his shoulders and frowning brow. "Curse the women! What keeps my thoughts turning toward her?"

Whatever those thoughts might be, they ended in sending the sport rapidly across the street and in at the open door of the Alhambra.

At first glance, nothing more than an ordinary bar was to be seen, before which several men were idly gathered, talking, laughing, drinking, their wants deftly supplied by the neat, white-aproned man behind the counter. But then George Penny noticed the gently swaying curtains, running on metal rods, by which the saloon was divided from an apartment devoted to gambling.

"Just a drop of rye," he quietly said as the barkeeper bent toward him with an expectant look. "I'm hardly acclimated, yet, and have to hit the bottle light. Besides, a man can't drink heavy and play the same way, unless he wants to measure both his head and his pocket."

"We're here to suit all tastes," laughed the barkeeper, though there was a trace of curiosity in his dark eyes as they glanced keenly over that coldly handsome face.

It was hardly the face of one of whom unasked for confidence was to be expected as a matter of course, and he wondered what object the stranger had in opening thus.

"Tiger in his den, of course?" added Penny, with a glance toward the nearly drawn curtains.

"Hardly awake, as yet, I reckon, but she's there when wanted. Dew Drop dines late, but the crowd'll find its way here before long. Smoke! Here's some I can recommend. Use them myself, when off duty. Thanks!" with a courtly bow as he received the coin, deftly returning change. "Think of trying your luck this evening?"

A rattle of glasses on the bar saved Penny the necessity of replying to this question, and as the brisk fellow hastened to attend the call, he leisurely passed along the counter until he could catch a glimpse of the regions beyond the curtains.

The apartment was well lighted by lamps attached to the walls, with two large chandeliers suspended from the ceiling, and that glance showed him a number of early gamblers, all gathered about a single table situated midway down the long room.

Pushing aside the drapery, George Penny stepped noiselessly forward, standing still with a bright gleam in his eyes. Once again he was gazing into the darkly beautiful face of the woman whom Dew Drop knew best as Lightning Kate.

She was seated at the back of the long table, which was covered with green baize, on which was painted the faro lay-out. Her white hands were idly clasping a heavy silver box, and she was waiting for a fussy gamester to finish placing his bets before beginning a fresh deal. Her tall, voluptuous form was garbed in black, trimmed with lace and jet, her round, perfectly formed arms bare to the elbows. About her white neck, in her ears, on her fingers flashed diamonds, and a jeweled serpent showed its glittering eyes on her wrists.

Cold, stern, paler than ordinary, George Penny leaned back against the curtain-covered partition at the end of the bar, his gaze steadily fixed on the Faro Queen as she began to slip the cards from the box.

In perfect silence she kept the run of the game, paying those who won and taking down the losses at each turn, independent of case-keeper or croupier, seeming a beautiful triumph of machinery rather than aught of flesh and blood.

Some such fancy flashed across the busy brain of the sport who watched, bringing a brief, hard smile to his lips.

"But when she wakes up!" came softly through his white teeth. "And I'm going to see those charming eyes of yours glow and spit fire, my dear, once more—I really must!"

Until the cards run out, Lightning Kate had eyes only for work, but as the last turn was completed and she deftly bunched the cards to shuffle them before replacing in the box, her eyes lifted and glanced leisurely around the room, seeing everything yet seemingly wholly unconscious of the admiring looks with which the gamesters favored her.

Suddenly she gave a start, and the pack of cards dropped from her fingers, a portion fluttering into her lap and on the floor. The warm flush faded from her smooth cheeks, and her red lips closed so firmly that their color was lost to sight for an instant. For her gaze was arrested by that tall, athletic figure leaning against the dark curtains, its pale face seeming, for a single breath, suspended there without a body to support it!

"Its your turn to be struck all of a heap, to

employ the vulgate, my charmer!" murmured Penny, showing his teeth in a cold smile.

Only for a single instant did Lightning Kate maintain that startled gaze. Then, with a slight frown gathering her arched brows, she bent over to collect the scattered cards. And as she replaced them on the table, a pearl-hafted, nickel-plated revolver bore them company.

As he saw this, a spirit of mischief seemed to take sudden possession of the handsome sport. Instantly his manner and looks changed. A touch of his finger tipped his silk hat rakishly on one side of his head, another touch brought a curl of hair down across his forehead, and as he started down the room, his handsome countenance looked that of a gay sport out on a lark, and pretty well "primed," despite the early hour.

"Beauty and the beast! Lady Una has swapped her lion for a royal Bengal, and—yours most truly, madam!" tipping his hat with a profound bow as Lightning Kate flashed a coldly vicious glance in that direction. "Hope I'm not intruding?"

"There is no bar against gentlemen," was the icy retort. "You ought to know whether that excludes you, sir!"

"If you'll be so kind as to take my word for it, I'm eligible," with a light, mellow laugh as he dropped into one of the vacant spaces, which chanced to be directly opposite the fair dealer. "Not knowing whither lucky chance would steer me, I forgot my character—left it in my other pocket; but how'll this answer as a substitute?"

He spread a handful of gold coin on the table as he spoke, beaming blandly into the beautiful face opposite. Lightning Kate curled her red lips in scorn, but declined to utter:

"It will serve as a flyer. I've taken the limit off, this evening, and that works both ways. If I should chance to overlook your bets, pray call my attention to them. Unfortunately I forgot my glasses."

As in duty bound, the other players laughed, though one and all betrayed curiosity at this marvelous change in the usually cold and silent dealer. As a rule Lightning Kate spoke only when absolutely obliged to, and then in the briefest possible terms. Now, she actually was indulging in sarcasm!

But George Penny seemed wholly unconscious of that. He joined in the laugh, and then hiding a yawn with one hand, used his other to stack up his yellow coin, pushing all across to the painted queen, topping the roll with a wooden button as he said:

"Begging pardon for my impoliteness, ma'am," he bowed, a laughing devil in his cool, gray eyes. "It's a lesson learned through sad experience. Lovely women has been my hoodoo for countless years, and as I have got into the habit of playing to win, my only show is backing the beauty to lose. And so—let her roll!"

Lightning Kate rippled the cards again and again, the bits of pasteboard giving out an almost vicious sound under her manipulation. Then, with the cards in the box, she cast a keen glance around to see if all was in readiness for the deal.

Once more she seemed the impassible machine. Only for the reddish gleam which shone through her eyes!

In perfect silence card after card was drawn, and then, by a curious chance, the first card to determine a wager was the queen of hearts, which came out in favor of the bank, though the sport won, through his having "coppered" the queen.

"Hit her first clatter!" laughed the gambler, as Lightning Kate rapidly matched his stake with chips. "Yet it fetches great tears to my eyes, through recalling the old maxim of 'Unlucky at love, lucky at play!' What are blue chips in comparison with bluer eyes? Red checks stacked up in the scales against redder lips? Ashes—ashes and sawdust! Still—we'll take what the gods bestow, and try to be content! Once more, I'm going for wool if it does turn out hair!"

He topped the stacks of chips with buttons, leaning back in his chair, gazing with half-closed eyes at the pale face of the dealer. And a murmur of astonishment ran through the room as the very next turn brought another queen on the side of the bank.

"Only twice more on this deal," lightly laughed the talkative sport, as he left his winnings and original stake on the lucky card.

There are few persons more superstitious than gamblers, and not another stake was left on the table after this bold venture. It was hardly likely that the queen would lose for the third time in succession, yet not one of those present dared wager against the luck of this glib-tongued stranger.

Even Lightning Kate grew a shade paler, and her fingers moved the cards more slowly than usual, though there could be no change until another queen should show her face. Steel-nerved though she prided herself on being, there was something about this man that sent a cold shiver creeping over her person. It was not fear, for she was hardly capable of feeling that. It was suspense. She knew that George

Penny had not visited the Alhambra simply to play faro. She knew that he had come there to wipe out an old score, and it was waiting for his first open move that tried her nerves so sorely.

More than half the cards were drawn in turn from the silver box before that almost breathless suspense was broken. Then—for the third time in succession the cool sport won!

The gamblers drew further away, leaving George Penny sitting alone at the table, smiling blandly as ever while watching the white hands of Lightning Kate rapidly stacking checks to balance his stake, until the rack from whence they were taken showed up almost entirely emptied.

"It's queer—deucedly queer, when you come to think it over!" softly murmured the sport, his eyes almost closed, a pensive smile playing about his lips. "You can see for yourself how the old thing works. The only way I can win a smile from the fair creature is by backing her frowns! 'Twas ever so, from childhood's hour! If I went to kiss a fair lady, I was dead sure to feel her teeth! And so—I've sworn off for good! Let them stand, if you please, on the same old footing. I'm really curious to find out if the tide will flow this way until the moon changes. Unless—I really beg your pardon, ma'am!" bowing low and forcing by some means a flush into his cheeks as Lightning Kate seemed to hesitate.

"Can you overlook my rudeness, dear lady? I really forgot for the moment that I might be inconveniencing you by my little whim. If you really wish it, I'll pull in all but a tiny stake, and—"

"Why should I wish any such thing?" sharply demanded the dealer. "If you are foolish enough to risk a fortune on a single turn, it would be worse than folly on my part to think of choking you off!"

"Then everything goes as it lies!" with a breath of relief as he again sunk back in his seat, lazily flicking the ashes from his cigar. "I believe I was born lazy, as well as unlucky, and—"

"Ef I only was bernded that same way!" loudly sighed Larry Pinkston, from the back of the sport's chair. "Somebody fan me with a pin while I watch that blessed mountain o' drunks an' good grub go meltin' away like a snowdrift rammed into a red-hot oven! Ef it was *only* me!"

The mourning hummer was rudely silenced by his nearest neighbor, for once more Lightning Kate was slowly drawing the cards, and all were too intensely excited to bear patiently with such lamentations.

"It's bound to come out for the fourth time," murmured the sport, with a slow yawn behind his shapely hand. "They can't help it. If I were to keep bucking the game for a solid week, it would be just the same thing over and over. So surely that, up where I come from, you can't find a pack of cards with the queens left in, unless there's a vulgarly low limit put on before a card is turned."

His voice subsided in a low, inarticulate murmur, and even when, by a marvelous run of luck, his prediction was verified—when the queen, for the fourth time in one deal, came out in his favor—he hardly moved in his seat.

A breathless silence reigned while Lightning Kate, with hands that trembled visibly despite her wonderful nerve, eked out her remaining checks with stacks of gold coin and bank-notes until her losses were squared to the dollar. Then—

"Let's try it another round, if all's agreeable," mildly uttered the stranger sport.

But Lightning Kate snatched up the cards and flung them far from her, and as they fell in fluttering flakes about the room, she cried:

"I'll deal no more! I'll never deal again for a hoodoo!"

George Penny started erect in his seat, his big eyes growing still bigger and seeming to fill with mild amazement as they stared at that tigerishly-beautiful face across the table.

"Meaning—surely not your humble servant, ma'am!" he murmured.

"Yes, I *do* mean you!" viciously retorted Lightning Kate, her trembling fingers closing upon the pearl stock of the revolver. "You're a hoodoo! I felt it when you first entered the room! You're a devil, in the guise of a man!"

"Is that it?" innocently drawled Penny, his brows arching. "Is that what they mean when the ladies—dear, sweet, angelic creatures, every one!—when they say I'm a devil of a fellow?"

For a moment it looked as if Lightning Kate was going to send a pellet of lead in answer, but then she turned at a sharp exclamation which came from near the division between the saloon and that room. And as she hastily turned in that direction, Larry Pinkston bent forward to hastily whisper in the ear of the winning sport:

"All eyes open, pard! Thar comes Finger-ring Johnny, an' his eyes is chuck full o' blood an' massareeation!"

CHAPTER XVI.

CONSOLATION IN DEFEAT.

LINK LOPER was wise enough, after his own fashion, and ardently as he longed for success that night, he rapidly concluded not to press

matters too hard. This phantom-like figure in the gloom had a most disagreeably business-like method of handling his tools.

Up went his empty hands, and he hastily quavered:

"Hold easy, pard! I ain't huntin' no sech? The road back to our shanty is plenty good fer me!"

The guard gave a short, grim chuckle, but he lowered his rifle at the same time, and Link Loper drew a long sigh of intense relief. In sober fact, his nerves had not entirely recovered from the terrible shock they had received when Daddy Dead-Eye hurled him over the precipice, to be saved as by a miracle.

"Jest as you reckon best, pardner," laughed the sentinel. "I'm a critter that hates extra trouble wuss than a old maid hates huggin', an' ef I was to make a skimmer out o' your hide, thar'd be a mighty heap o' 'splainin' to do, I reckon, when the crowd come out to see what sort o' Fo'th o' July it was. An' so—reckon it's easier fer to turn ye back."

There was something so unexpectedly mild in all this, that Link Loper in a measure regained his old shrewdness when that grim muzzle no longer covered him. Was it wholly impossible? Might not this affable guard be won over to aid in their escape? Or, if he would not venture that far, couldn't he be paid to close his eyes for a certain period of time, sufficient for them to effect an escape with a captive?

The yellow coin promised him by Eli Prosser seemed to dance before the vision of the bony spy, and he longed, yet dreaded to put his slowly reviving hopes to the test. What if they were to prove false? What if the guard should prove incorruptible, or worse; what if he were to resent the insult with a bullet?

"Ye see, pardner," placidly added the sentry, as Link Loper made no immediate response, "business is business. I was set out yere fer to keep all eyes open ef any o' your gang should be durned fools enough fer to run away from free lickin' an' free grub. Ef any *did* make a try, I was to halt 'em an' 'zamine 'em an' tote 'em over to the boss. Anyway, I was to keep 'em from leavin' town 'long my line o' fence. Ef they wouldn't halt at the word, so much the wuss fer them, an' I was to do the haltin' fer 'em the easiest I knowed how. An' so, ye see, pardner, you saved me anyway one ca'tridge by fetchin' up so mighty prompt at the say-so!"

Little by little Link Loper was recovering from the shock which he had received, and as the guard droned away like one too lazy to stop talking when once fairly started, the bony spy leaned further forward, his little eyes beginning to glow and gleam ardently. Then—

"Ef you'd only lift that bat o' your's, critter, Pd—be durned ef it ain't, anyway!" he ejaculated, overflowing with delight at the discovery. "Hairy Dick! Don't you know me? Shorely you ain't goin' back onto a ole side pard like Link Loper?"

The guard dropped the butt of his repeater to the ground, the barrel resting in the hollow of his left arm as he met those bony hands, gripping and shaking them warmly, laughing the while.

"Ef I hedn't knowed ye, fu'st off, Link, by that hoop-pole figger ye tote 'round with ye, I *do* reckon you'd bin cold meat afore this time!" he uttered, grinning broadly into the gaunt face of the spy. "I hed my orders, an' it's a heap easier shootin' from kiver than talkin' a man's notions contrariwise ag'inst his will. I hed you lined. I hed a finger crookin' pritty hard onto the trigger, when somehow I 'peared to place my target. An' so—waal, pardns once, pardns ever."

Link Loper shivered perceptibly as he listened. It was a curious contrast, this being so near death just when he was counting the most certainly on complete success.

"But it's all right now, ye know," grinned Hairy Dick, as he noticed this shudder through the darkness. "An' you'd never 'a' bin any the wiser ef I hedn't told ye the hull thing."

As he spoke, the guard doffed his hat to rub his skull, thus betraying the grim wit which had dubbed him "Hairy Dick." For not a single spear of hair was to be seen. His skull was bald and bare as a billiard ball, giving him a strange and even disgusting appearance.

"If you'd on'y sung out yer name!" half-grumbled the spy, despite the genuine pleasure which this discovery had given him.

"I wanted to see how long it'd take fer you to smoke a old pard," with a low chuckle. "I knowed ye fu'st glimp', back yender," with a nod of his glistening caput toward the distant plateau, "but you hedn't no eyes fer me. An' then— Say, Link, how in time did ye git over that pitch-an'-toss the boss lent ye! I'd 'a' tuck my Bible oath you was booked fer glory, that trip!"

Again Link Loper shivered, turning giddy and sick at the stomach as he recalled his frightful experience. But then he had a particular desire to keep on good terms with this old friend, and so he forced himself to briefly describe the manner of his salvation.

After all, it was quite simple, though he might not have met with the same good fortune in ten thousand trials more.

When Daddy Dead-Eye hurled the spy from him, Link Loper struck on the escarpment, rolling over and dropping almost straight downward to what seemed certain death. Instead of falling all the way to the heaps of ragged rocks at the base of the precipice, he struck in the thick, elastic top of a cedar tree, only a few yards below the escarpment. He caught among the boughs with a death-grip, and from thence sent back the yell of fear and agony which drew his comrades to the verge.

Then, little by little, he regained his nerves and strength, finally reaching the rocks by means of the bending tree-top, and then working his way upward until, as described in its proper place, he sprang out and captured Vesta Massey.

"Them what's born to stretch hemp, ye know, Link!" laughed Hairy Dick, with a grim face-tiousness. "Thinks I, when I see the boss give ye that blessed frog jump, thar's 'nother good feller gone to 'farnal smash! An' when I ketched ye hoppin' up ag'in, piert an' lively as a cricket, be durned ef I didn't hev to grip an' hold mighty tight onto my own coat-tails fer to keep from runnin' 'way! Skeered me ontel the ha'r o' my head turned pure white—ef it didn't, I'm a howlin' liar right from Storyville!"

Link Loper joined in the laugh, but it was after a sickly fashion. Although he was sound in wind and limb, it would be many a long day before he could recall those horrible moments with anything like coolness or complacency. And as soon as he dared, he began leading up to his renewed hopes.

"Waal, not to change the subject, pard, but how're ye fixed, anyway? How're ye makin' it? Kerry a boranza in each pocket, I reckon? Gobs o' oro, an' nothin' to do fer it in turn, o' course!"

"Dollar a month an' find myself!" grunted Hairy Dick, all signs of hilarity vanishing as by magic. "Twenty-fo' hours on duty, an' the rest o' my time fer playin' an' sleepin'. Y-a-s! I'm jest gittin' lousy with wealth!"

"Why don't ye strike out fer richer pastures, then?" muttered Link Loper, casting a swift glance around them in the darkness, as though to make sure no inconvenient ears were drawing nigh. "What ef I was to p'int out a way fer ye to make a mighty snug stake fer yerself, an' that 'thout your runnin' no great resk? What ef—eh, pard?"

Hairy Dick shrugged his shoulders with grim significance.

"It's easy to talk, pard, but ef you knowed the boss like I do, you wouldn't come at it so mighty brash your own self! He's wuss than pizen b'iled down double! The old boy hisself wouldn't dar' to cross him when once his head's sot onto a sart'in thing!"

"That's one way o' lookin' at it, Dick, but you fergit t'other," added the bony spy, his hand resting on the guard's shoulder, his lips close to his ear. "Man or devil, he can't harm what he can't git his grips onto. Man or devil, he can't grip what keeps out o' his reach. An' ef what he showed up this day, over yender, is a straight sample o' his every-day doin's, then a man's a mighty fool to stop 'long o' any sech crazy critter when they's a fa'r chainece fer gittin' away! An' a fool ten times over ef that same chainece is lined on both sides with yaller boys! Fer what I'm—"

"Git back, critter!" huskily muttered Hairy Dick, leaping back a yard or two, his rifle coming to a level at the same time.

For a single breath Link Loper was bewildered by this abrupt alteration in his old friend, but then the sound of another voice came to his ears, explaining all:

"What's the matter here, Hairy Dick?"

The tones were those of Perley Grace, the little man in gray who was temporarily filling the boots of Daddy Dead-Eye. Harsh and stern the tones, and the steady gaze was full of suspicion as the watch-dog came up to confront the two men.

"They ain't nothin' the matter," sulkily growled the bony spy, as he drew back a pace. "I was out to ketch a breath o' fresh air, when I run up ag'inst this critter. An' he swore ef I didn't mosey back in a holy second, he'd blow me through like a riddle, durn him!"

"That's nigh the hull truth, boss," quietly added Hairy Dick, falling in with the example set him by Link Loper. "I didn't want to plug the critter ef I could git 'long 'thout it. But ef you say so—"

"It'd be wuss then bloody murder!" ejaculated the spy, hastily.

"Then don't run any more such resks," coldly retorted the little man, a hand falling heavily on Loper's arm and twisting him right face. "You ain't nigh so innocent as you try to make out, my fine fellow. You was lookin' for liberty heap more than fresh air, I reckon."

"Waal, ain't it nat'ral enough?" growled the spy, viciously, yet making no resistance as the little man forced him back toward the cabin.

"Mebbe so, but it's heap more dangerous," with a short, hard laugh. "You am't near such a fool as you try to make out. Then—take a bit of good advice and go to sleep over it."

"Rest content with what's measured out to you. Eat an' drink an' sleep. Fer the rest,

wait untill Daddy Dead-Eye comes back to say what's to be done with you. I won't swear he'll turn ye loose, foot-free an' a whole hide on your back, but I do say this much—it's better to run that risk than to try to leave Dew Drop without permission. You've got off once with sound bones. The next time you try to run the lines, I'm afraid you'll come to grief."

Perley Grace spoke slowly, seemingly wishing each sentence to sink deeply into the mind of the bony spy. And by the time his last words passed his lips, they were close before the little cabin to which he had consigned the party of Mormons.

The little watch-dog rapped sharply at the door, and it was flung open promptly enough by Wallace Massey, who started back with a short ejaculation as he recognized Link Loper in such company. Perley Grace smiled grimly as he noticed this start, and he spoke coldly:

"I've brung the stray lamb back, pardner. Keep him better folded, unless you're anxious to lose him fer good an' all. It's mighty resky business takin' sech a stroll as his, this night. You sabe, pard?"

Wallace Massey said not a word in answer, and Perley Grace laughed grimly as he turned abruptly on his heel. He felt that this little lesson would not soon be forgotten by that party.

And yet, had he seen the broad grin which spread over the gaunt face of Link Loper as the door closed behind him, his mind might not have been so entirely at ease.

"Satan grill you for an idiot!" snarled Massey, flushing hotly as he caught sight of that grin. "Isn't it bad enough to make a botch of it all, without snickering over it? For little I'd—"

"Button up, boss!" chuckled Loper, his grin widening until it really seemed as though his head would part just below his nose. "Ef I'm a idjit, I don't know it. Ef it's all a botch, you can't prove it!"

"What do you mean?" demanded the startled Mormon.

"That I'm goin' fer them yaller boys, an' I'm goin' to git 'em, too!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A BEWILDERED LITTLE SPORT.

GEORGE PENNY rose promptly from his seat at that warning whisper hurled at him by the excited bummer, but apart from this he showed no signs of alarm or excitement. He quickly secured the gold and notes lying on the table, thrusting them into a side pocket, then uttered:

"You freeze on to the chips, Larry, and play banker until I relieve you of your charge. If any one tries to help you, just give a yelp, and I'll try to argue the case with them."

But despite this seeming coolness, the wandering sport was fully awake and on the alert. His keen gray eyes swept the room, pausing on the slender, foppish figure of Finger-ring Johnny, who had just stepped from beyond the curtains.

If Larry Pinkston had slightly exaggerated in his excitement, he had not spoken entirely without foundation. If there was no blood actually visible in the eyes of the little sport, his white, stern-set face showed almost as positive a signal of danger.

He was deliberately advancing toward the lucky gambler, with his hands at his waist, where showed plainly enough the butts of his revolvers. And his light blue eyes were shining with unusual brightness for them.

George Penny saw that Lightning Kate had vanished, sweeping past Finger-ring Johnny and through the saloon, apparently without a word or sign to the little sport whom all Dew Drop credited with being her husband, or protector.

He saw that Finger-ring Johnny expected nothing less than a fight to the death, and even in that moment he felt a certain degree of admiration for the little fellow who so steadily advanced, without making any effort to "catch the drop" by drawing his weapons unawares.

The spectators saw "music in the air," from the manner of the little sport, and hastily fell back, ready to duck and dodge in case the anticipated lead shower should begin before they could gain safe positions. But instead of this, quite another surprise awaited them.

"Is it—can I believe me eyesight?" cried George Penny, striking his forehead in a tragic manner, staring open-eyed at Finger-ring Johnny for a single breath. "It is! It was! She am, fer ducats!"

With outstretched hands, and beaming countenance, he started forward, the very personification of joy! And before the bewildered little sport could fairly divine his purpose, Penny had him by both hands, which he gripped ardently and shook warmly!

"It is—Johnny, boy, how are you? Where did ye come from? Where have you kept yourself all this long time? How goes it, anyway?" he exclaimed, his joyous smile intensifying with each question, his strong fingers keeping those jeweled hands tightly imprisoned, working them up and down with the regularity of an old-time fire machine.

"I don't—I want to—" gasped the little sport, only to be cut short by that joyous voice:

"Don't I know it, my dear fellow? Don't I know that you're so full of pure delight your blessed old tongue can't begin to spit it out? Ain't I the same way? Holy Moses! Johnny, I'm so glad to see you this blessed night that I can't utter a single syllable to save my life! If I wasn't a professor I'd dance—I'd caper and prance and cut pigeon-wings until you'd be ready to take your Bible oath you'd dropped right down into the biggest roost nature ever knowed! Johnny—would you kick up a row if I were to hide my mug in your manly buzzom long enough to spill a pint or two of salt water?"

The bewildered little sport forgot his warlike intentions for the time being. All he thought of, just then, was how he could free himself from this wild rascal, who was covering him with ridicule. For the men inside the building were laughing heartily at this wholly unexpected termination of what had at first bidden fair to prove a tragedy.

"I don't—confound it, man!" gasped the poor fellow, vainly striving to wrest his crushed fingers free from that close grip.

"Of course you wouldn't, pard," laughed Penny, compromising the matter by shifting his grasp until he strained the little fellow with suffocating force to his broad bosom. "What is a laundry bill when two dear friends meet after such a long and painful separation? But the fit has fled, and I reckon I can get through with the rest without dampening your linen, or—I say, Johnny, who does 'em up for you?" he broke off abruptly, gazing admiringly upon that stiff-starched bosom!

Finger-ring Johnny fell back a pace or two, panting for breath, the picture of helpless bewilderment.

His wits were never too active. He was always slow to act, and apt to feel at a loss in an unexpected emergency, though there was not a single drop of cowardly blood in his body.

He knew that he had performed an act, in the past, which few or no men can ever forget or forgive, with George Penny as a victim. And when Lightning Kate told him of her meeting with the wandering sport, it was perfectly natural for him to think Penny was seeking vengeance. To offer him satisfaction was his first thought, and ever since he parted from the Faro Queen, he had been searching for the injured man, but without success until now, meeting him at last with the expectation of being shot at on sight. Instead—surely George Penny was crazy!

Not so bad as that, however. With his nerves tightly strung, his brain set on fire by all that had transpired since his attention was attracted to the perilous situation of Vesta Massey, the wandering sport was taken possession of by a wild, whimsical, reckless demon, to whose malicious whisperings he gave full hearing.

"I say, Johnny, you've come just a bit too late to enjoy the fun! Why didn't you holler, or send a wire to let me know you wanted a bit? I'd have hit 'er lighter, and kept the tiger in good humor until your arrival. As it is—you won't kick over the traces if I ask you to share my good luck? You'll take those bits of ivory and—eh?"

"I'll cash them, and—"

"What?" his face the personification of mortified surprise. "I haven't been robbing your bank, Johnny? Don't tell me that, if you love me even a little bit, dear boy!"

Finger-ring Johnny made no reply, but hurried to the faro table where Larry Pinkston was gloating over the stacks of chips, licking his lips hungrily as though envying the fortune which had showered all over his recent employer. Pushing the bummer aside, John Mack rapidly summed up the amount, then hastily wrote a few words on a bit of paper.

"This is the amount due you, I believe," he said, coldly. "They'll cash that at the Express office. And now—"

"We'll take a drink, of course!" laughed Penny, locking arms with him and striding toward the saloon. "I'll blow in what I can at the bar, and save the rest to feed the pretty tiger with when the bank opens up again. Gentlemen, you'll join us, of course?"

"But—durn it, man!" gasped the little sport, holding back. "I won't drink—I can't drink with you until—I want to shoot you!"

It was now the turn of George Penny to show bewilderment, and he filled the bill to perfection. He staggered back, staring at the flushed face before him, his lower jaw drooping, his eyes widely dis ended.

"Shoot me? Me? You? Johnny," rallying with the sudden gravity as he shook a finger slowly before that hot face, "you've been hitting the bottle too heavy! Johnny, you're drunk!"

"But—confound it all!" with desperate energy, backing away from that admonishing finger.

"Then let Con keep what he found," with a light laugh, once more gripping the little sport and urging him toward the bar. "You're so far gone already that another hair can't harm you, to speak of. And I'll agree to pilot you to your little bed and tuck you safely up for the rest of the night. So—what? Still stubborn? Johnny, boy, you didn't use to be so!" with sad reproach in eyes, face and voice.

Desperately Mack strove to collect his scattered wits, and succeeded sufficiently to utter, in a strained tone:

"I want—you haven't forgotten the past, Mr. Penny. Of course I didn't take her away without first counting the cost. And now—"

While he painfully gave vent to these broken sentences, a light of comprehension seemed slowly dawning on the brain of the other. And at this juncture, George Penny cut in with:

"Is that it? Is that what's turned you from an old pard into a complete stranger, Johnny? Well," with a short, peculiar laugh as he added coldly: "I beg your pardon for my forgetfulness, though you are partly to blame for not reminding me of my indebtedness before this."

Taking the scrap of paper from his pocket, he forced it into the hand of the amazed sport, adding:

"Cash that, and set it down as the first installment of my debt, Johnny. I can't pay you all off, in a lump, for that would break down the Bank of England! But be sure of this: if I live long enough, I'll pay you in full for relieving me of that—baggage!"

Bowing mockingly, George Penny tossed a few coins on the bar, bidding the keeper supply the crowd with what best pleased their tastes, then turning on his heel and leaving the Alhambra without another look toward Finger-ring Johnny, who was standing motionless, the picture of helpless bewilderment as he stared at the bit of paper in his hand.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A CHOICE BETWEEN EVILS.

It was with a certain grim sense of triumph that George Penny took his departure from the Alhambra, leaving wonder and confusion behind him. It was not exactly after this fashion that he expected to part from Finger-ring Johnny, with what lay behind and between them, but he had yielded to the first mad impulse, and this was the result.

"After all, what matter?" he muttered, beneath his breath as he moved away from the building, with an occasional backward glance, more than half expecting to catch a glimpse of the little sport in pursuit. "The end will be just the same, and I've had a little fun out of both."

The laugh was harsh and bitter that came to his lips at this. And his brows contracted darkly as he thought of Lightning Kate and her present position.

"Dealing faro for a lot of drunken loafers! No wonder she lost color when she caught my gaze upon her! If—bah!" with intense bitterness, that flatly belied his words. "What matter? What care I? When she chose that little runt before me, she blotted out all the past, so far as I am concerned. On that day she ceased to live, for me!"

While busied with his thoughts, of which we have given a dim shadow here, George Penny took little note whither his footsteps carried him, after those first few moments. When he lost sight of the red lamp suspended above the door of the Alhambra, and saw no signs of immediate pursuit on the part of the bewildered little gambler, he strayed on without aim or intention. But now, as a dark figure suddenly uprose before him, he halted, a quick flush leaping into his pale face as he recognized the building immediately before him.

It was the home of Perley Grace, within which he had seen Vesta Massey disappear, not many hours before. And the figure in front of him was that of the vigilant little watch-dog, Perley Grace himself.

"Ef you're huntin' fer anybody in p'tick'lar, pardner, mebbe I kin set you on the right track," drily observed the owner of the house.

Despite his thorough surprise at finding whither his steps had led him, the sport made prompt enough reply:

"Suppose I should take a notion to leave town?"

"Well, I'm hopin' no sech notion'll hit you very hard, pardner," was the slow response. "I really think you'd better wait in Dew Drop until Daddy Dead-Eye kin git back. Fer, to put it plain, I don't reckon you could git out ef you was to try, 'thout hurtin' somebody—or gittin' hurt by your own self. An' that would be too mighty bad!"

"That settles it, then!" with a short laugh, turning on his heel and moving away. "Reckon I'll go to the hotel and bunk in!"

But the wandering sport was fated to meet another interruption before he could find his pillow, and just before gaining the hotel, a man came hurrying up to where he paused in the light of the lamp above, with the checking salutation of:

"I say, pardner!"

"Why don't you say it, then?" sharply retorted Penny, facing the fellow one hand touching a pistol-butt.

"Bet I will, ef you give me time," with a grin, as he thrust his head forward, his little eyes gleaming keenly as they scanned the face of the gambler. "Reckon your name is George Penny?"

"And I reckon my name is my own," tartly. "Who are you, anyway, and what do you want of me?"

"Not a durn thing ef you ain't the critter I do want! But ef you be—ef you're the high-roller as bu'sted the bank wide open over Alham' way this evenin', then I'm totin' a load fer your eyes. That's you, ain't it, pardner?"

It was clear enough that this fellow was not on mischief bent, at least on his own hook, and George Penny promptly responded:

"That's my name. What next?"

The fellow hesitated just a bit, as though he would like better security; but then, with a shrug of the shoulders, he said:

"All right. Ef it ain't all right, no matter. The 'scription fits cluss enough fer to let me out, even ef it turns out you ain't you, but another cuss! An' so—I say, pardner, you know a mighty daisy little woman called Lightning Kate, don't you?"

George Penny drew back with a sharp shake of his head. And his voice was cold and hard as he spoke:

"I know no such person."

"Then your good luck is all ahead o' ye, pardner! But that don't count. They is sech a pusson. An' that pusson paid me fer lookin' of ye up an' 'liverin' a billy-ducks—the size o' this!"

As he spoke, the fellow slipped a white envelope between the hand and belt of the wandering sport, seemingly suspecting a refusal in case he simply offered it after the customary fashion. George Penny did reject the missive by a swift movement of his hand, much as one might withdraw from the touch of a venomous reptile, but the messenger laughed carelessly as his eyes followed the fluttering bit of paper to the ground.

"All the same, pardner, I've kerried out my 'structions. I've hunted up the right man. I've 'livered the billy-ducks to him. What comes o' it fuder don't faze me an iota. 'Ca'se the honey daisy paid me in advance—see?"

"Go tell the woman who sent you that I don't know her."

"Ef you make it wu'th me while, 'course I will," with a frank grin. "But wait ontel I git shet o' all my fu'st load afore we dicker, pard. You're dead sure you ain't mistook? Fer why: Lightning Kate told me, an' she put it mighty powerful strong, too, I want ye to know! She said that mebbe you wouldn't be fixed jest so's to make the call as quick as needed, an' fer me to say that ef you wasn't, she'd do you proud by lookin' ye up at your hotel. I was to make haste back, ef you wasn't payin' calls, or ef I didn't ketch you by midnight."

He stopped short as George Penny stooped and picked up the note, tearing off the cover and rapidly mastering the brief contents by the red rays streaming from the lantern above.

There was neither address nor signature, but it was plainly to be seen that he had no difficulty in recognizing the handwriting.

"Come to me at once on receipt of this, I must and will see you where we can talk with perfect freedom. Refuse to come, and I will call on you at your rooms."

Only this, but that was enough. George Penny knew that Lightning Kate would carry out her threat without stopping to count the results, and he had no wish to see her asking for him at the tavern.

"She said I was to show you the way back, ef you 'cluded to come," uttered the messenger, shrewdly divining the truth. "Shell we mosey?"

George Penny nodded assent, tearing the note to atoms and scattering them bit by bit as they passed through the gloom. And there was a cold, hard, merciless look in his eyes and upon his pale face that boded but ill for the dashing Faro Queen.

Dew Drop did not cover a great deal of ground, and as the fellow guided him by the shortest route, a very few minutes sufficed to carry George Penny to the front of the little building occupied by Lightning Kate. And the shaggy messenger heaved a mighty sigh as he muttered:

"Thar's the shebang, pardner, an' t'other side o' that door, you'll find the sweetest posy-flower o' seventeen States! I'd give a leg ef it was you doin' the pilotin' an' me playin' spark—waal, now, I jest would! So-long, pard! An' ef the glory should cause a bu'st-up in yer copperosity, I won't ax a red cent fer sweepin' up your 'mains an' plantin' 'em whar the daisies'll play nid-nod crost the heap! No I won't!"

The gambler tossed him a coin, waiting until he vanished amid the gloom before advancing any nearer the door. Then, banishing all traces of emotion from his face, he tapped sharply at the barrier.

Instantly a little slide was opened, and a bright flash of light came through the opening, to be obscured an instant later by the darkly-beautiful face of Lightning Kate. Then the door swung open to give him admittance, closing again after he crossed the threshold.

"You sent for me, I believe, madam?" coldly uttered the sport, his cool gray eyes meeting that fiery gaze immovably.

"And you come at my beck!" with a trace of triumph in her voice.

"Simply because I thought it less trouble than to deny you admittance at the hotel.

Though, to simmer it down to cold facts, I reckon there was a bit of a bluff in that threat."

Lightning Kate gazed steadily into his eyes, her own orbs filled with a curious glow which is not easy to describe or analyze. For one thing, she seemed trying to break him down at the outset; to bring a flush to his cheek, or a glow of anger to his eyes. But after a few moments she seemed to realize the futility of such an effort, and with a low, mocking laugh she dropped into an easy-chair, nodding toward another near at hand.

"All right if you think so, George! Be seated, won't you? It makes one feel like a stranger, to see you standing up so stiff and starched! That was all right, when other eyes were upon us, but now—thanks?"

There was a mocking, malicious, even wicked gleam in her dark eyes as the handsome gambler quietly seated himself at her bidding. Penny saw this, and a vivid spark leaped into his own eyes as he read her thoughts aright.

"Anything to shorten the interview. And I can admire your delicious cheek from a seat, just as well as standing, Kate."

More the manner in which he spoke than the words themselves, sent a spasm of hottest anger through the woman. Her cheeks fairly glowed, her eyes flashed like living fire, and her enforced composure vanished. There was a visible struggle against her passion, but it was plainly betrayed by her voice as well.

"You ice-blooded demon!" she hissed, one hand swiftly rising to her heaving bosom, flashing forth a wicked looking dagger. "I wonder why I don't fly at your throat! I wonder that I did not send a bullet through your brain when I looked up to see you to-night at the table!"

"It would have saved your bank a loss, Kate," with a cold smile. "By the way—if it is a fair question—who's backing you now? Surely not little Finger-ring? If so—well, I'd look him up if I were you, for I really reckon he's in need of a nurse, just about now."

"If you have killed him—"

"Not unless I scared the poor little fellow to death, Kate."

With a desperate effort the woman regained something of her usual self-control. She still held the glittering steel in her hand, but she managed to steady her voice, to school her features before saying:

"Johnny is little, but that's the worst you can bring against him."

"Unless I impeach his judgment in running off—excuse me," with a low, mocking bow. "For the moment I forgot that I can't touch him on that point without pricking you, as well!"

Lightning Kate flushed hotly, then turned almost ghastly pale. But beyond this she gave no signs of having felt a sting. As though Penny had not interrupted her, she continued:

"Little as Johnny is, there's more real manhood about him than can be found in ten-score such as you! As for scaring him, you lie in making even a hint to that effect. There isn't a drop of cowardly blood in his body!"

"On the other hand—are you impregnable?" with sudden malice filling her tones as she leaned forward with eyes aglow. "How about to-day? How about our meeting on the hill, yonder? You turned white as a bleached sheet, and stared as though a ghost or death's-head had suddenly risen in your path!"

"You know my old love of beauty and purity?" drawled the sport, his lips curling, his gray eyes half-closing as he gazed into her face. "And remembering this, can you wonder that I should shrink from—"

With a harsh, grating cry Lightning Kate leaped to her feet, her right hand drawn back with the dagger flashing wickedly in the light. For an instant it seemed as if she would leap upon that coldly insolent speaker. And if he had shown any sign of fear—If he had touched a weapon, or even attempted to rise in self-defense, she would surely have made her death-leap.

CHAPTER XIX.

A MAIDEN'S PRAYER.

VESTA MASSEY said never a word while Perley Grace was transferring her to the care of his wife; that matronly, good-humored looking woman of whose face and figure we have caught a glimpse in the door of her comfortable little cabin.

Nerve-shaken, heart-sore, weary-brained though the maiden was, after all she had endured since her desperate flight first began, she knew that this cool, quiet little man would prove to the full as difficult to shake by argument or pleading as Daddy Dead-Eye himself. And yet, as she listened, the first real ray of hope which had brightened her pathway since Wallace Massey and his bloodhounds struck the trail, came to the poor, overtaken girl.

Surely she would find a kind and sympathizing friend in this woman with the motherly face? Surely one so mild-eyed and pleasant-lipped could be won over to her side by her pitiful tale alone?

Roxanna Grace had little to say and few questions to ask while her little husband was tersely

giving her her instructions concerning their unexpected guest. And when he had said what he deemed enough, Perley Grace turned on his heel and left the building, without deeming it necessary to await questions or comments.

Vesta noticed this, and though she did not permit it to wholly discourage her, her hopes grew fainter and less real. Sympathy was one thing, and help was quite another!

Mrs. Grace bustled about busily, but found plenty of time for fleeting glances at her guest. Her curiosity grew with each minute, though she managed to keep it in check save for those wondering, half-questioning glances.

And while the good dame was occupied in spreading the table, adding an extra cover to the pair which ordinarily sufficed, Vesta Massey was debating her wisest course to pursue.

It would be so much comfort to confide in one of her own sex! If she could only ease her poor brain by sobbing on a friendly bosom!

But the maiden quickly fought back the uncertain mist that began to gather over her eyes at this thought. She had no time for yielding even that far. She must work—she must steel her nerves—each minute must be improved to the best of her ability. Time enough for girlish weakness when naught else remained to be accomplished!

It was no fear lest sympathy be denied her, that kept Vesta from at once confiding all to Mrs. Grace. There was no deceit, no guile in that frank, kindly face and honest blue eyes which, even so soon, were mutely appealing to this poor stray lamb.

"Would she disobey him—would she go against her husband for my sake, a stranger?"

That was the haunting doubt. And if she had felt her story less tragic, less pathetic, Vesta would never have dared entertain even so much as a doubt after the masterful manner of the little man in gray.

"If she was only a mother! If I could see children about!" Vesta kept repeating in her troubled brain, mechanically following that busy, bustling figure with her weary eyes. "But she is a wife—a loving wife, else her eyes told lies. Would even love of justice lead her to go against the will of the man she loves?"

Ever returning to that point! Ever striving to crush down doubt and fears by hope.

Perley Grace came back, and Vesta Massey forced herself to eat and drink at his kindly invitation, but there were precious few words uttered during that meal. It was plain to be seen that the little man fully appreciated the importance of his duty, and that he was resolved the interests of his master should not suffer through any negligence on his part, for as he left the table, he hurriedly uttered:

"Make the lady as comfortable as you kin, Roxy, and shet the house up tight afore you bunk in. I've got business outside that'll be pritty apt to keep me goin' until sun-up."

Mrs. Grace opened her lips to question her husband, but before her tongue could express her mind, Perley Grace was outside, hidden by the darkness. And Vesta came to an abrupt conclusion as she saw that half-angry, half-disgusted frown which came into the matronly woman's face.

"It's some of that ugly critter's work, I know. I don't wish anybody ill, but it would be a blessing to all decent folks if Daddy Dead-Eye would borrow the wings of a crow and fly away to never-come-back-again! So, there!"

"Who is he? what is he? Where did he gain such terrible power over all men?" ventured Vesta; but with scant satisfaction so far as her curiosity was concerned.

Mrs. Grace shook her head vigorously, a frightened look coming into her mild blue eyes as she glanced out at the window.

"It isn't for me to say. I don't dare think, even. All I know is that he keeps a thousand times better men than he going and coming eternally at his beck and call. Sometimes I get so mad at Perley—"

The light faded from the eyes of the maiden as Mrs. Grace abruptly checked herself. Truly it was a forlorn hope. If this wife would not permit herself to even finish a sentence showing pettishness against her husband, what hope could there be of winning her over to aid in an escape?

Yet it was her only chance, Vesta reasoned, and before long she was half-seated, half-kneeling before Mrs. Grace, talking in low, eager, passion-shaken tones.

"You will—you must help me, if only by giving me your womanly sympathy," she said, a yearning light drying the tears which had leaped to her eyes. "If you were a mother—"

"She's dead—our little girl—"

"Think—if she was living—if she was in sore trouble—if your life depended on her escape from captivity!" panted the maiden, taking fresh hope from those broken tones and tear-laden eyes.

Mrs. Grace gave the girl a quick, passionate hug, then wiped her eyes, as though to give room for the curiosity which flamed up anew.

"You don't say! It surely isn't that bad? Dear me!"

With an effort Vesta choked down her emotions, and spoke rapidly:

"Let me tell you my sad story, and then you can decide for yourself, dear Mrs. Grace."

"Years ago—when I was but an infant, in fact—my mother fell into the power of the man whose evil passions has brought all this trouble upon us. She married him when I was very young, but she never suspected the horrible truth—that he was even then a Mormon!"

Mrs. Grace gave a sympathetic shiver at that ugly title. Plainly enough Wallace Massey would find no sympathizer in this woman!

"The ugly brute! A Mormon! And your mother—poor thing!"

Vesta gently touched her lips to the large, kindly hand which she held clasped between her own, and in low tones proceeded:

"It would be too long a story to tell all that followed the second marriage of my poor mother, though to do so would, perhaps, be the surest method of gaining for her your sympathy. And yet—if what I have resolved to tell does not move your heart, then it must be proof against mere words!"

Mrs. Grace moved uneasily in her chair. A more kindly heart never beat in a woman's bosom, but then—her husband! She instinctively divined the hopes which led this fair stranger to confide in her; but could she ever gratify them? Could she bring herself to act contrary to his will and wishes?

Vesta felt this motion, and divined something of the truth. But she knew that in this quarter alone could she look for aid and assistance, and she steadily pursued that frail hope.

"It is hard to know just where to begin, or what to leave out. So much depends on awakening your fullest sympathy that—"

"Wouldn't it be better to sleep on it?" faintly suggested Roxanna.

With a pale, wan smile, Vesta shook her head. Time was by far too precious for further delay. If her escape was to result in the wished-for good, it must be speedily made.

"I must tell you—I must show you how sad events forced me hither. It is cowardly in me to hesitate. I have no shadow of sin on my conscience. I do not want you to hear his side of the black story first. Don't I know how plausibly he can lie? How plainly his cunning tongue can turn white to vilest black?"

"As if I'd even listen to him!" with a toss of her head and momentary flash of her blue eyes. "A Mormon! Ketch me!"

"And when I tell you that he is trying to force me into becoming the fourth wife of another Mormon, even more loathsome in face and character? When I tell you that to avoid such a horrible alliance my mother and I fled from home—when I say that it is to accomplish this hideous marriage that I am now being chased and persecuted?" panted the maiden, her face flushing, her dark eyes glowing vividly.

"Then I'll—only for Perley!" abruptly checking herself.

"Will you let him stand between you and justice? Will you aid him in bringing about a hideous crime such as this? Oh! if you are a woman, with a woman's heart and a woman's sense of honor and justice!" cried Vesta, tightly clasping that hand, her voice growing choked and unsteady with powerful emotions. "If you love the daughter you have lost—"

With a sobbing cry, Mrs. Grace bowed her head upon that of the maiden, who sought her aid and comfort. And with arms wound about each other, the twain remained silent for a brief space.

Vesta was the first to break silence, lifting her head, drawing back a little from the other. She forced a wan smile to her face, and spoke in more steady tones:

"Now I know your heart is in its right place, I can speak more freely. I beg of you to listen, and to let your heart decide what is right and just and proper on your side."

"Until a few weeks ago, I never doubted that Wallace Massey was my own father. Never once had he or mother hinted to the contrary. And as a father, I tried to love and honor him. I believe I did both, until his own actions forfeited that love and honor."

"Where we lived, it was the rule, rather than the exception, for men to have plural wives. I was brought up to believe in the Mormon religion. And yet, I could never feel that it was entirely right. As I grew older, and better able to reason, these doubts grew into firm convictions, and when father—as I then believed him—first spoke to me about marriage, saying that Eli Prosser wished to make me his wife, I fled from him in perfect horror."

"Never mind what followed. It would take too long to tell you of all his arguments, his angry reasonings, and then, when I stood firm, his savage threats and curses. But when he went still further—when he dared to beat me—"

"The brutal cur!" angrily interjected Mrs. Grace.

"Then mother and I fled in the night, never stopping to count the risk, the thousand perils which we must meet by the way," added Vesta, her tones lowering and growing unsteady. "We fled, on horseback, resolved to suffer death rather than recapture. We fled, knowing that swift and persistent pursuit would be made. For not only had Wallace Massey dared to use

force with me, but he had cruelly whipped poor mother for venturing to remonstrate with him! Yes! he not only flogged her, poor, weak, ailing mother! but he swore that I should marry Eli Prosser—And he swore that he, too, would take a young and beautiful bride, since his wife saw fit to fly in the face of their religion."

"I never thought I'd fall so low, but I do wish—if I only knew how to swear right hard, I think it would be a comfort now!" slowly uttered Mrs. Grace, her blue eyes flashing, her hands clinching tightly. "I'd like to have that devil tied hand and foot; I'd just love to put in one solid day's work whipping him with nettles! So there, now!"

Vesta again caught those strong yet womanly hands, crying:

"If you want to punish him, aid me to escape! Let me go free, to hasten back to poor mother! I left her, sick, nigh unto death, while I tried to draw the bloodhounds off the scent. She may be dying—she may be dead, even. Oh, Mrs. Grace! I beg of you to let me escape! See—on my bended knees I pray to you!"

CHAPTER XX.

A PROMISE OUT SHORT.

MRS. GRACE was plainly touched by that appeal. Tears sprang to her mild blue eyes. She bent her head and pressed her warm cheek to that of the pleading maiden. Her voice was far from steady as she said:

"You poor, persecuted darling! Will it *Won't* I, rather! And if that miserable wretch of a rascally Mormon comes to me to ask why I've done it all, won't I give him a piece of my mind? Yes! and I'll waste a kettle full of good hot water, too, unless his legs are lots longer than his conscience!"

Vesta uttered a little sob of joy at this prompt and earnest response to her prayers. She had been so long without a friend; she had for so long fought the battle alone and single-handed; that now an ally was won, complete victory seemed assured from the outset.

"Heaven will reward you, dear, kind, generous friend!" she cried, rising to her feet, clasping Roxanna's hand between both of hers, pressing it warmly. "And should we never meet again, in this world, be sure our fervent prayers will keep your memory fresh while life endures!"

Mrs. Grace looked and acted like one deeply embarrassed. Vesta plainly thought of immediate flight, and had so interpreted that impulsive speech. It was hard to enlighten her, but it had to be done.

"Sit down again, child," gravely, tenderly uttered the elder woman, using gentle force with which to insure obedience. "There is no such terrible rush, for—of course—we can do nothing to-night!"

It was a bitter, crushing, heart-sickening blow and for a brief space it seemed as though the poor girl would sink beneath it. There were genuine tears in those mild blue eyes as Mrs. Grace drew the maiden down upon her lap, holding her in her strong arms as she gently rocked back and forth, much as a mother might soothe a sobbing babe.

"You think me hard and cruel and heartless, don't you, deary?" she murmured, her warm cheek resting upon that bowed head. "You think I've been playing the hypocrite all along? But you're mistaken, as I hope to prove to you in good time, pet!"

"Prove it now!" cried Vesta, lifting her head and gazing straight into the face of the woman, her eyes glowing through their tears. "All I ask of you is permission to pass through yonder door—and your silence until they learn of my flight by other means!"

"What good would that do, deary? How long would it be before your flight was discovered, and chase was made? That would be more cruel on my part than to keep you here by force."

The maiden strove to conquer her great excitement, and to all outward appearance she succeeded in doing so. She resumed her former position before Mrs. Grace, and there was something in her eyes that told her purpose; she would make still another effort to win her point!

"I'm afraid I was in too great haste with my story: let me make it clearer to you, dear friend," she began, unheeding the low shake which Mrs. Grace gave to her head. "And then, when you know all, and can fully appreciate the need of haste in all I do, if you still counsel delay—but I will not, I dare not think that!"

"If you could know how gentle, how meek, how long enduring and forgiving the nature of my mother, it would be so much easier making you understand. You would know, then, that she suffered a thousand times worse than death before she dared take such a decisive step as flight. I have only given you the main points. I was so anxious to be up and doing that I dared not consume precious time in filling out details."

"I've heard enough, and more than enough, deary," gently interposed Roxanna. "If all that lacked was good will and good wishes,

you'd be many a long mile from Dew Drop this very minute! But—I'm thinking of my man, little girl!"

"He is a man, isn't he?" with a fleeting frown darkening her pale face. "What harm can come to him, as long as he acts in good faith? I am not asking his aid. I do not ask yours, beyond the closing of your eyes while I leave this prison!"

"But you don't understand what—"

"It is you who fail to understand how much depends on my getting away from this horrible place without further delay or loss of time!" impetuously interrupted the maiden, an hectic flush coming into her cheeks as she hurriedly spoke. "It is not for my own life and liberty alone that I am fighting. It is for my poor mother, who—listen!"

"I told you of our hasty flight from a fate which we both deemed worse than death! I told you how we were pursued and overtaken, but I dared not waste precious time in telling all that we suffered and endured before the bloodhounds again struck our trail. If it was hard on me, young, strong, high-spirited, what must it have been to poor mother?"

"I fear that she received her death-blow before we started. I feel now that she lost all hope for herself when she felt those brutal blows from the hand which should have soothed and cherished her declining days. I can see it now, but then I was blind; I could only see and dread the horrible fate that awaited my own recapture!"

Her voice choked and faltered, but only for a brief space. Mrs. Grace pressed her little hands reassuringly, but before she could put her sympathy into words, Vesta Massey continued:

"Our flight lasted for many long and trying days, for we dared not seek information by the way, lest we leave behind us too plain traces for those whom we felt assured were in pursuit. We avoided all human beings, when possible, trusting to kind Heaven to guard us against going too widely astray. And thus it came about that we often lost miles of ground, through having to retrace our steps, or else make wide detours, in our ignorance of the ground which lay before us."

"Our stock of provisions grew low, then failed us altogether. We were two days and nights without a single morsel to eat. I could see, then, how rapidly poor mother was failing in strength, though she bravely dissembled, for my sake. And then, knowing that she must have rest and care beyond what I could give her in those lonely wilds, I set out in quest of a hiding place where we might recruit."

"Never mind just where, but we found it," added Vesta, with a sudden caution, as though she felt impelled to doubt even this sympathizing friend. "And then, just when our hopes were highest, we heard of the bloodhounds yelping along our track!"

"Mother was far too weak and broken down to even think of further flight. She begged me to hasten and save myself. She smiled faintly as she said I had little to fear on her account. He would hardly dare use violence against her, now."

"It was like tearing soul from body to go away, then, but I knew it was for her dear sake, and with a single kiss and a prayer for her recovery, I did so."

"I had only one thought, just then. My one hope and prayer was that I might succeed in leading the human hounds far astray before they could suspect that I was fleeing alone. Thank Heaven! I succeeded in doing this! Thank Heaven! they never once suspected the truth!"

"I crossed their trail before they had a suspicion of our having gone into hiding at all, and though I left abundant signs behind me, I contrived to keep out of their sight until far away from the place where poor mother lay in concealment! After that, I tried to make my victory double, but in vain. The cunning demons conquered me at last!"

The maiden ceased speaking for a few moments, her hands tightly clasping those of her hostess, her eyes gazing steadily into those blue orbs which showed sympathy and doubt in almost equal proportions.

"Now you know all, dear friend! Now you can understand why I am so anxious to make my escape from this place without further delay. For something warns me that if I see my poor mother in life, I must make haste! Something warns me that she is even now at the point of death! And surely you are not cruel enough to keep me here while a mother is longing, yearning, praying for her child?"

Mrs. Grace nearly gave way, but then her strong, natural good sense came to the rescue. She spoke kindly, cheerily, earnestly:

"It's natural that you should have these fears, deary, but I don't believe in 'em. I don't think God is so cruel as all that. I feel in my bones that you've gone through the worst, and that there's many a long and happy year before both you and your mother."

"Help to bring that about, then!" almost fiercely cried Vesta. "If you are in earnest, show your good wishes by setting me free, to hasten back to poor mother! Give me one

chance to see her again before the grave divides us!"

"I'll do it, deary, but it must be after my own fashion," was the prompt if grave response. "I'll do all that lays in my power, if you'll only listen to reason on your part."

"Anything—so long as you do not counsel delay."

That homely face grew graver, more troubled at this.

"But delay is just what I've got to advise, deary," she said, her tones firmer than ever. "Isn't it better to be slow and sure, than hasty and foolish? Isn't it better to escape to-morrow, than to try it to-night, only to fail?"

Vesta made no response to this. She bowed her head, covering her face with her hands.

Mrs. Grace gently touched her dark curls with a tender hand as she spoke again, her voice low, earnest, full of strong emotions:

"If you have a mother to think of, deary, I have a husband whom I love to the full as tenderly, though you mightn't think it, to look at us both, we being perfect strangers to you, and your poor brain all mixed up 'long of those rascally Mormons!"

"I'm big enough to be his great-grandmother, as I often tell Perley, when we're joking, as married folks will do once in a while. But, for all that, he's master in this house—and I'm not ashamed to own as much," a bright, loving light coming into her kindly eyes. "And so, you see, it's hard to even think of flying in his face and against his wishes, as I fear I must do in helping you to get away."

"You mustn't think hard of my man, though," with sudden dignity. "A truer, kinder, opener heart than his never beat inside a human bosom, though I say it myself. Only—if you knew more of that terrible critter, it wouldn't be so hard to believe! Why, badly as I hate and abominate him, if Daddy Dead-Eye was to come and bid me tie your little hands and keep you starving on bread and water, I really don't believe I'd have power to fly in his face and not do it! So there!"

"Then I am to give over all hope? I am to regard you as one of my cruel enemies, instead of the friend I hoped to discover?"

"No, you ain't, deary," was the swift response, as Roxanna drew that dark-haired head tightly to her motherly bosom. "I'm going to do all I can or dare do, but—I must not forget my good man, either!"

"As I said, you've no idea what an awful frightful brute that same Daddy Dead-Eye can prove himself when he's crossed in his will! And now he's had another of his awful fits, and left everything in charge of my man, all that goes crooked or contrary will naturally be laid up against poor Perley!"

"It's for that reason, more than all else, that I advise you to wait a bit before acting. And then I don't believe you could possibly succeed in getting out of town, even on foot, and alone, without Perley's seeing you. If he did see you, of course he'd have to fetch you back."

"Not alive!" panted the poor girl, almost beside herself with baffled hope and haunting fears on her mother's account. "I'll never be captured again while life endures!"

"All the more reason why I should make you wait until you can be pretty sure of getting clear of Dew Drop without being seen. Now you just listen to me, deary, and try to see for yourself that I'm doing all for the best. Promise to wait in patience, and I promise to help you get away from this place, in—"

Without warning, the outer door opened and Perley Grace entered. His face was cold and his tones hard as he uttered:

"You're doin' too much talkin', Roxy. The lady'll be all the better of she gits a good night's sleep. Fix her bed, an' you go too. I'll be up an' about the rest o' the night, I reckon. You understand?"

Without awaiting a reply, the little watchdog turned and left the room. And with pale, agitated faces the two women interchanged looks. How much had he heard? Did he suspect his wife's intentions?

CHAPTER XXI.

A DOUBLE WARNING.

ONLY his utter recklessness of life saved George Penny from an attack which could hardly have ended without bloodshed.

Without lifting a hand to save himself, he sat in his chair, his lips curling, his handsome face lit up by a smile of amused scorn at the passion-convulsed woman whose keen weapon threatened his life.

"Theatrical as ever, Kate!" he drawled, mockingly, his gray eyes fixed on those darkly-brilliant orbs. "Do you know, I've never once put foot inside a place of that sort since you flitted, lest I'd see you rigged out in tights and spangles, delighting the gods with your marvelous charms?"

"You malicious demon!" panted the Faro Queen, flinging aside her dangerous toy and sinking back into her chair, hiding her hotly-flushing face in her hands.

George Penny said nothing. He produced a fresh cigar, coolly lighting it and gazing with half closed lids through the blue smoke at the

woman whose superb figure shook and shivered with broken sobs. Either his must have been a heart of ice, or this woman had wronged him to the very uttermost.

Lightning Kate quickly recovered, and his coolness seemed to lend her renewed nerve. Her face paled with the effort, but she conquered herself until she was, outwardly at least, as hard and unfeeling as the wandering sport himself.

"Then you hardly came to Dew Drop expecting to find me, George?"

The gambler shrugged his shoulders slightly before replying:

"Well, hardly! Of course the temptation would have been tremendous had I known that Dew Drop counted such a charming flower among its other attractions, but—I never went very heavy on flowers, you know. No, Katie; I'd be lying were I to say that the hope of meeting you brought me to this delightful place!"

"I thought as much when you turned chalky up yonder!" with a malicious glitter leaping into her dark eyes again. "And then—who was that girl I found you with, George Penny?"

Just the shadow of a flush tinged the cheeks of the gambler at this abrupt query, but Lightning Kate saw it, and found in it proof of her suspicions quite sufficient to send the hot jealousy leaping through her veins once more.

"Don't try to lie to me, George Penny!" she cried, sharply.

"Why should you think I'd go to all that trouble?" asked Penny, his brows arching, his eyes filling with contemptuous surprise.

"Answer my question, will you?"

The sport hesitated for a few seconds. His face hardened, his eyes turned hard and steely.

"If you refuse, I can find out elsewhere, no doubt," pointedly added the Faro Queen.

"It would be a thousand pities to give you so much unnecessary trouble, my dear," quietly uttered the gambler, his face once more an impenetrable mask. "There's no secret about my part of the matter. I only hesitated because I had so little to say."

"Allow me to be the judge of that, George Penny!"

"I never met the lady an hour before you put in an appearance with your little gun. I heard a racket, and when I saw a woman facing down half a dozen ruffians, I chipped in after my modest fashion. Got a rap on the skull. Had the honor of wrestling a single fall with your lovely chief, Daddy Dead-Eye. Was flouted by the young lady when I offered to carve a pathway for her dainty little feet through the gang. And—that's about all!"

"According to your say-so!" flashed the beautiful tigress, with eyes full of curiously-mingled hatred and jealousy. "Don't I know you, George Penny? Don't I—"

"You had ought to know me, after your past experience, certainly," with a faint smile flitting across his handsome countenance.

"I do know you!" rising from her chair once more, the picture of passionate excitement. "I know that you're keeping something back from me! I know that you are lying when you speak of that girl as a perfect stranger! I know—listen to me, George Penny!" at the same time fighting hard to steady her tones and compose her features.

"No matter what has gone before, I am still your wife!"

"What a happy fellow I'd ought to be!" mocked the gambler.

"You bloodless demon!" panted Lightning Kate, falling back until one hand rested on the back of her chair. "Are you the man I fancied loved me in those days when—"

"Don't you think you'd show a little more decency, Kate, were you to steer clear of all such reminiscences?" coldly interrupted Penny, "remembering what followed those love-days?"

"I remember more than that! I remember how your cold, hard, merciless nature drove me to sin! I remember—bah!" forcing a laugh and dropping once again into the easy-chair, her tones growing cool and steady, though her great eyes still gleamed and emitted fire flashes. "What use to bring up those days, as you hint? None—save that I wish to remind you of one thing: that is—you are still my husband—I am still your legal wife!"

"Don't let that simple fact trouble you, my dear," drawled the gambler. "Be sure I'll never claim my conjugal rights, nor do I much fear your attempting to do so."

"That depends, George," with deliberate emphasis. "I know that you have never secured a divorce, though I recommended it, and—"

"Possibly I thought your actions were sufficient divorce. Or, it may be, I wanted a safeguard against falling victim to another lovely creature's wiles," bowed the gambler, with a cold, sneering smile.

"All the same, that record still stands. All the same, George Penny, you want to steer clear of that doll-faced girl, yonder, or I'll trumpet my claims all through Dew Drop!"

"Will you tell the whole story, Kate?" still with that peculiar smile curling his mustached lips. "Will you ring in the fascinating Lothario, finger-rings and all?"

"Even that, rather than see you making love to another woman!"

"Drop it at that, if you please, Kate Leclair," coldly uttered the gambler, rising from his seat, tossing aside his half-smoked cigar. "I'm none too particular in some things, I admit, but when you single out a lady, pure and innocent as you are—"

"Be careful, George Penny?" springing across the room to catch up her discarded dagger. "I can't stand everything, even from you!"

"I've given you a hint. You've favored me with a warning; now listen to one from my lips in return, Kate Leclair."

"You are worse than nothing in my eyes. Still, had I known you were at Dew Drop, I would have cut off an arm rather than come to the same place. Instead of hunting for you, as you seemed to expect, I've tried most faithfully to keep out of your way. Not complimentary to you, I admit, but it is the simple truth."

"Is this the warning you spoke of?" Lightning Kate coldly uttered, though her tightly-compressed lips and glittering eyes told how difficult she found it to stay her nerved hand while he spoke with such cold, stinging scorn.

"You took your own time to lead up to your warning; grant me the same privilege, won't you?" laughed the wandering sport. "Remember that you sought this interview. Bear in mind that I granted it, simply because you threatened to pay me a visit instead."

"As I would have done had you refused to run at my beck!" laughed the Faro Queen. "As I may do, even yet, unless you profit by the warning hint I have given and steer clear of that girl!"

"That warning was hardly necessary. I am surprised that so smart and far-sighted a woman as yourself, Kate, did not realize as much. Just consider the situation for a minute!"

"You say you are my lawful wife, and I grant the bare fact, if that can give you any satisfaction. It at least proves that I once thought you worthy to bear my name. And it is hardly a sin, one making such a mistake, is it?"

There was no response. Lightning Kate dared not trust her voice, just then. This cold, sneering, contemptuous manner stung her to the very quick. If he would only break out in a rage! Even curses and savage threats would be far preferable to this biting scorn!

"I married you in good faith, and I tried all I knew to make your life a happy, contented one. There must have been bad blood in your pedigree, Kate, else I would have succeeded better than that!"

"Go on, you icy demon!" the woman panted. "It is your turn now. Mine may come sooner than you anticipate!"

George Penny arched his brows in mock surprise.

"May come? I thought it had already come—or are you mistaking me for Finger-ring Johnny?"

"I'm making no mistake, and you know it, hide that fact though you are trying, George," the woman added, with sudden calmness. "I've seen the old light in your eyes more than once since your coming. Don't willfully mistake my meaning, George," forcing a smile as she spoke. "I've not forgotten how those eyes of yours could talk of love and devotion in earlier days. Of course I know that they will never light up that way for me—I'd stab them out with this, if I thought you'd even attempt it!" flashing her dagger before his face.

"I sincerely trust you will, Kate," with a mocking bow. "I could never trust them again, after such a cruel betrayal!"

"Guard them against shooting love-lances in her direction, then! But you'll never do that!" with a harsh, bitter laugh. "Daddy Dead-Eye is law and gospel in Dew Drop, and I'm his prophet when I see fit to don the crown! A single wave of my hand is enough to bring him to his knees at my feet. And—if you force me to do so—I'll turn him loose on this new star of yours!"

"You are letting your mad, unreasoning jealousy carry you too far, Kate Leclair. The lady is nothing to me. As your husband, she would scorn me, even as I, at times, scorn myself. But that is not what I set out to talk about."

"I met Finger-ring Johnny this evening, and at first glimpse I could see that he was on the war-path. Of course we both know why. He thought, as you did until I posted you better, that I came here hunting for you and him. I saw that, and though it was a rather cruel trick, I so thoroughly bewildered the poor fellow that he'll hardly get his scanty wits clear before another day!"

"Sneer at him if you will!" flashed Lightning Kate. "Weak as he may be, there's more true manhood in John Mack's little finger than in your entire body!"

"You can't expect me to go quite that far, Kate," with a short, hard laugh. "But I'm free to confess that Johnny is a good little fellow at bottom; far too good for the fate which has overtaken him. From the very first I have felt sorry for the little rascal. Only for this—well, had he been like some men I've known, maybe I'd have followed closer on your track!"

"But I confess that I rather like Johnny. And feeling thus toward him, I'm taking all this trouble to give you a warning."

"If you want him to live and prosper, Kate, see that he keeps out of my path. I spared him to-night, when I would have been fully justified in shooting him down at sight, for he was ready to burn powder, as every one present could see without half trying. Instead, I contented myself with making him a laughing-stock for the crowd."

"Still, I can't play the same trick twice. If he comes at me again, I'll have to shoot the little rascal, and I'd much rather not do that. Keep him away, if you can, Kate."

Without pausing for a reply, George Penny turned toward the door.

"And you bear my warning in mind, please," laughed the Faro Queen as she stepped forward to spring the lock which held the door shut. "I may not be over-nice, as you were kind enough to hint, but I'll never rest quiet while my husband is philandering about with another girl!"

Without reply, the gambler left the building.

CHAPTER XXII.

FINGER-RING JOHNNY DEMANDS SATISFACTION.

NOT until he was well within the shadows beyond the light showing through the open door in which, like a picture, the superb figure of Lightning Kate was framed, did George Penny turn his head for a backward glance. Then his proud yet careless erectness grew less notable, and something not wholly unlike a sigh came to his lips.

For in the years gone by, he had madly loved this woman who had dared to still call herself his legal wife.

It was a black story to recall. Doubtless they had both been to blame, in greater or less measure. Each was proud and passionate. Neither would bend an inch, or be the first to step across the rapidly widening breach. And then the end came.

Until the flight of his wife, George Penny had never fully realized how intensely he loved her. He knew it then, when he came home from one of his business trips, to find that home desolate, without even one word in parting. Realized it—only to feel that passion die beyond resuscitation the minute he knew beyond all doubt that Kate had fled in company with another man.

He had spoken little more than the truth during this interview which Lightning Kate had forced upon him. He had made no effort to find or overtake the fugitives. He hoped never to meet either again. And nothing had been further from his thoughts than running across them in this region, else he would have changed his course like one fleeing from a plague-spot.

As we have seen, he avoided an encounter with Finger-ring Johnny, by taking that slow-witted little sport by surprise. It was true enough that he had rather liked the little fellow, in days gone by, but it was a false reason which he gave Lightning Kate for sparing the fellow.

"I'll let him off as easy as I can, if he insists on crowding me," he muttered, as he watched the tall, perfect figure disappear behind the closing door. "For her sake, evil as she has proven herself! For what will become of her when Johnny is gone?"

It was a somewhat curious speech for a husband to make, and George Penny seemed to realize this, for a low, mocking laugh rose in his throat as he turned away in the direction of his hotel, and the darkness served to hide a flush that leaped into his cheeks.

The wandering sport really intended to seek his bed, this time, but the fast-flocking events of that night were not yet at an end, so far at least as he was concerned.

He lightly ran up the low flight of steps which led to the first floor of the building, entering the office and saloon combined, for the purpose of procuring the key to his chamber, when he stopped short on the threshold with a sudden frown.

Facing him, cold and ceremonious, was Finger-ring Johnny!

One far less accustomed to wild life than the wandering sport would have seen at first glance that the little gambler meant pure business just now, though he was so quiet and coldly polite.

"I wish a few words with you, Mr. Penny," he said, tipping his hat and gazing fairly into the eyes of the man whom he deemed his enemy. "I don't want to crowd you too hard, but I earnestly trust you will spare the little time necessary to hear me out."

A swift glance showed Penny more than one face which he remembered having seen in the Alhambra, and he knew that Finger-ring Johnny's intentions were no secret from them. Their eager faces alone proved that, even if their instinctive moving to either side, leaving a clear passage for words or more deadly arguments, had not emphasized it.

A red glow leaped into his eyes as he knew they had been waiting for his coming, for a harder blow than this can scarcely be dealt a man of his caliber. Such actions seem to infer

a wish to escape a meeting, and a professional "sport" can better afford death than calumny of that sort.

"Didn't I pay you enough down, Johnny?" he sneered, tartly.

A hot flush leaped into the little gambler's face, then faded out as swiftly, leaving it white and stern. But George Penny could never again "rattle" him as he had at the saloon.

"It is just that which brings me here, rather than waiting for chance to fetch about our meeting, Mr. Penny. You made a mistake back at my place. You left a bit of paper in my charge, and then ran away before I could fully explain myself."

He turned to the office bar, behind which a tall, gaunt, gray-haired man was anxiously watching the scene, saying:

"Johnson, will you be so kind as to transfer that little amount to this gentleman?"

The landlord produced a stout canvas bag, the contents of which emitted a musical jingle as one corner struck against the safe. But neither of the two sports were looking at him, just then. Finger-ring Johnny was facing his rival, speaking coldly, incisively:

"From what I picked up after your rather hurried departure, Mr. Penny, I infer that you broke the bank at my place to-night."

"Well, something of the sort took place. I was rather more than half asleep at the time, and am a mighty poor witness to ask for particulars. I know I was playing a bit. I believe a woman was dealing. She left, rather hastily, but whether it was because I hit the tiger where he lived, or from some slight at me, I'll never tell you. Then, and once more that irritating smile curled his mustaches, "I woke up to recognize you, dear boy. After that, I reckon you know pretty well what took place!"

"I know that you deeply insulted me by forcing upon me the money you won at my bank," was the cold, stern response. "As soon as I could manage it, I procured cash for the note I gave you in exchange for the chips, then hastened here as the surest chance of finding you. The gold is in yonder sack. Johnson has counted it, and can testify to its correctness. Do you accept it, Mr. Penny?"

"Since you will not accept it as a first payment on the great debt I owe you—gladly!" bowed the other. "As for insulting you—"

"You did insult me, by thrusting money upon me as though I was a bagger," hastily interposed Mack, flushing, plainly anxious to conceal the real cause of dispute from the company. "If you are a gentleman, you will not force me to seek satisfaction in a street row. If you are not a coward, you will meet me in—"

"Spare your precious breath, Mr. Mack," coldly interposed Penny. "Since you're bound to blow your brains out, I might as well be the instrument as any other man. Say when, how, where, and I'll do my level best to cool your angry passions off!"

"Not in here, gents!" cried the landlord, pale and trembling as he flung up his hands in excitement. "Think of my guests! Think of—oh! I can't have it in here, I tell you!"

There was something so ridiculous in his cracked tones and half-distracted manner that drew a laugh from the lips of George Penny. Finger-ring Johnny was cold and stern as ever, but he spoke up promptly enough:

"If he objects, of course we must seek some other place. Perhaps you will kindly make a suggestion, Mr. Penny? Anything is good enough for me. All I ask is a fair shake!"

The wandering sport shrugged his shoulders, all his old coolness restored after that brief flash of anger.

"You say, Johnny. I'm a stranger here, and will even have to beg or hire a second among these gents, since you want to perform strictly according to the code."

By this time the room was pretty well filled with eager citizens, who had got an inkling of what was in the wind, and as George spoke thus, several among them stepped a little forward, eager to have their services accepted. His keen gray eyes glanced swiftly over them with seeming carelessness, but his selection proved that he was not throwing away any chances. All he wanted was a fair show during the preliminaries, for after that he felt that he could care for himself.

"I'm noways proud, and so—if he will serve—I'll ask this gentleman to act for me!" he said, stepping forward and dropping a hand on the ragged shoulder of Larry Pinkston!

Finger-ring Johnny flushed hotly, and his pale eyes gained a fresh sparkle at this. He took the selection as another slur against himself, but before he could interpose a word, the half-drunken bummer spoke:

"You do me proud, boss, an' ef I don't fetch you through with flyin' colors, it'll be beca'se the gent knows how to shoot too mighty well! Anyway, they won't hev it to say that they lost time 'long o' my stoppin' to skeer the flies off o' me own self! Whar's the critter I want to 'cuss the tams an' conditions with?"

Finger-ring Johnny drew one of the party a little aside, whispering briefly in his ear; then he and the bummer went into the hall to arrange the conditions of the duel.

"By the way, Johnny," drawled the wandering sport, lighting a cigar. "Can you shoot with your left hand?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

A SHOT BY TORCHLIGHT.

FINGER-RING JOHNNY stared open-eyed at the speaker in silence for a single breath, unable to comprehend his meaning. Then he said:

"I use my right hand. Why do you ask?"

"Simply for information," was the laughing reply. "If you live long enough, maybe you'll learn further. Until then—"

He stopped short, as Finger-ring Johnny abruptly turned his back. Right or wrong, the little sport believed his rival was trying to "rattle" him again, and he was resolved to permit nothing to come in his way at this stage of the game.

The crowd was steadily gathering, though the hour was growing quite late. Finger-ring Johnny showed the most uneasiness, being in ignorance of the fact of Daddy Dead-Eye having fallen before another one of his strange "spells." But for once the Despot of Dew Drop was out of the way, and there appeared to be none other who dared or cared to interfere.

The chosen seconds cut little time to waste, and Johnny Mack was still puzzling his brain over that curious question, when the stir and bustle among the company announced their return from the hall.

"All cut an' dried, gents," chuckled Larry Pinkston, who plainly "felt his oats" at having been selected from so many better-looking men for such an important position. "When two gents puts thar noddles together in good airnest it don't take ferever to do nothin'—eh, pard?" with a grinning wink at his companion.

That gentleman rather stiffly drew back, clearly not in love with the unsavory bummer, whom unexpected chance had brought him into connection with.

"It is agreed that our principals use their own guns, unless they prefer other arms. That they be stationed twenty paces apart. That they are to fire between the words *fire* and *three*, for the first time. After that, if a definite result is not attained, they may fire at will, either retaining their positions, or advancing, as they see fit."

"An' I'm open to bet even odds that they ain't no two shots needed on our side," cried Larry Pinkston, ramming a hand deep down his trousers' leg, and scowling ferociously around the eager faces for a taker, when George Penny sharply muttered:

"Button up, Larry!"

"That settles it," with a meek bow toward the sport.

"Where can we bring it off?" asked Finger-ring Johnny, cool and business-like in face and tones.

"Out in the street. We'll rig up torches—I've got 'em at my place," promptly answered his second. "Some of you run down and ask Jim for them, won't you?"

Half a dozen men hurried away, and in a marvelously brief space of time the hotel office was cleared of all save the four men—the principals looking after their revolvers, and the seconds attending them, as in duty bound.

With less well known characters, there might have been some time consumed in searching for other weapons, but here this was not even once thought of. Finger-ring Johnny firmly resolved to kill the man whose tongue could cover Lightning Kate with shame. George Penny felt confident that he would only need a single shot to carry out the object he had in view.

The torches—relics of a past year's celebration of a grand epoch in Dew Drop's history—were quickly brought and planted in the ground at the proper distance apart. They were swinging lamps for oil, and their wicks burned almost without a flicker on that still night. The red light was quite sufficient for the purpose, as both of the duelists promptly admitted on inspection.

Larry Pinkston fidgeted about, casting frequent glances into the face of his principal, plainly desirous of saying something, yet as clearly at a loss how to broach the subject. He permitted Mack's second to superintend the arrangement of the lights, and this fact alone goes far to prove the puzzled state of his mind. It must be something of great importance which could cheat him out of such a glorious opportunity for cutting a dash.

"I orter hev stuck out fer what I fu'st thought of," he muttered in uncertain tones, from close beside his principal's elbow. "It'd be no more'n right, seein' the bigness o' you, an' the littleness o' him, fer to've sawed out his size on a thick board to stan' up an' kiver all o' ye 'cept that same bigness!"

"He isn't so small but what I can find him," laughed Penny.

"Durn him! It's you I'm botherin' over!" blurted out the bummer. "What ef he hits you—hits you hard, right whar you live?"

"What if he should—sure enough!" echoed the wandering sport, a curious glow in his eyes that was not altogether the red reflection of the torches. "I don't know an eye that would be dimmed, or an—"

"I ain't nobody, then?" sniffed Pinkston, his voice melancholy itself. "But don't stop to think o' me—I ain't nobody! An' thar must be some one you'd like fer to hev word sent to, 'long 'ith your ducats an' all sech-like?"

There was a covetous light in his bleared eyes as he spoke, but George Penny did not choose to interpret it aright. He laughed softly before speaking again:

"I'm glad you reminded me, though I don't really expect to hop the twig just at present. Still, if anything serious should happen to me, see that my ducats return whence they came: send them—with my best regards—to Lightning Kate!"

Larry Pinkston cast a meekly reproachful look into those laughing eyes, then turned away without a murmur. At least he would perform his duty to this sport, ungrateful though he was proving himself.

From that moment on the bummer was the most prominent personage on the ground until the duelists took their positions, each standing in the full glare of the torches.

Larry Pinkston insisted on tossing a coin to decide which should have the privilege of giving the word. He won the toss, and forgetfully pocketing the coin, he hurried to his station, ready for action.

Cool, steady, seeming far more unconcerned than many of those who had gathered to watch the duel, Finger-ring Johnny and George Penny awaited that signal. It was not long delayed. Now that Larry Pinkston knew he had no hope of falling heir to his principal, he seemed in a hurry to get the business over with.

"Ready, gents!" he cried, sharply. "You understand the terms? I'll say fire, then count three. You want to pick trigger atween them words, after the fu'st, an' afore the last. Now—hyar she goes!"

"Fire!—one—two—three!"

Swift as thought itself George Penny swung up his right arm, his weapon discharging the instant it reached a level, seemingly without any attempt at taking aim on his part. But Finger-ring Johnny gave a stifled cry, his right arm suddenly dropping helplessly to his side. The revolver dropped from his nerveless fingers, exploding as it struck the hard earth.

That cry attracted all eyes toward the smaller sport, and hence it chanced that none saw how Penny started in his tracks at that explosion. And as Finger-ring Johnny caught his shattered member with his left hand, Penny strode rapidly toward him.

The spectators flocked forward, but none of them save John Mack's second ventured before the tall duelist, whose face was cold and white as he met that angry, baffled glance.

"Do you insist on another shot, John Mack?" coldly demanded Penny, in whose right hand still hung his revolver.

A faint, sickly smile crept across the face of the little sport, as he pushed his second aside with his sound arm, saying:

"It's your privilege, Mr. Penny. I'll never beg my life at your hands! As for me—see!"

He pointed to his right arm, shattered above the elbow and perfectly helpless.

"I know you won't beg, Johnny," with a laugh that was far more friendly than any tone he had as yet made use of. "But, all the same, you've got to owe your life to me. I could have killed you just as surely, and with much less pains, but—I didn't want to do it. You've got some one to live for. Do your duty there, and I'll feel more than repaid. And—now you know why I asked about your shooting with your left hand. I didn't want to kill you. I couldn't afford to stand a second shot from a man of your nerve!"

"You didn't have to stand even the first!" with a slight scowl.

"Are you sure, Johnny?" and George Penny laughed softly as he opened his coat to show a steadily widening blotch of crimson on his right side. "I reckon your gun held a grudge against me, too! Anyway, I've got it right here—how hard I can't tell you, just yet!"

The proof was indisputable, and as Larry Pinkston saw it he cried out in stentorian tones:

"Whar's a doctor! My kingdom fer a medicine-sharp!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

DADDY DEAD-EYE STILL AN ENIGMA.

PERLEY GRACE closed the door behind him, standing motionless and still for a few moments on the step, seemingly listening to assure himself that his terse orders were being carried out.

If he had discovered aught—if he had caught the pleading and prayers of Vesta Massey, or detected the more than half-yielding of Roxanna—there was no evidence to be read in his face or his eyes.

He was naturally grave and reserved, though in time of need his tongue was fluent enough, and he rarely carried his emotions written upon his sallow face. Just now the stars seemed to show him graver, colder, sterner than ordinary, but that might easily come from the extra weight of responsibility which the sudden re-

tirement of Daddy Dead-Eye had flung upon his shoulders.

Just the ghost of a smile flitted across his sallow face as his quick hearing caught the faint sounds from within. He knew that Roxanna was preparing to obey his parting hint, and that there would be little further conversation between the two women that night.

He moved silently away from the front door, pausing for a brief space at the corner of his house, his head bowed as if in deep thought.

Little wonder at that!

Cool, quick-witted, steady-nerved though he was, Perley Grace carried a heavy burden that night. And his task was by no means lessened by his complete ignorance of Daddy Dead-Eye's plans for the future, or his reasons for holding all these people inside Dew Drop, awaiting his pleasure.

"If I knowed that, it wouldn't come so pesky tough, I don't reckon!" the little watch-dog muttered, barely above his breath, as his gaze wandered restlessly about, ever on guard. "If I knowed he hed good reasons fer it all, even! But—sometimes I can't altogether help thinkin' that mebbe he's a leetle loose in his wits. Not crazy, but sorter unsettled, like! An' ef this is one o' them spells—ef he don't—"

With a start and frown Perley Grace checked his musings at this juncture. His jaws seemed to grow squarer, and his hands clinched as if he felt tempted to punch his own head for daring even to mutter a word against the giant deformed, whom he held as his chief and master.

Obedying the restless instinct which urged him to keep moving, Perley Grace passed on around the corner of his house, only to stop short with a sudden, fierce indrawing of his breath. He quickly drew a revolver from his belt and half-lifted the weapon to cover a dark figure which he sighted silently crawling through a small door or shuttered window just under the eaves.

Even as the figure dropped noiselessly to the ground, it lifted a hand and made a quick gesture toward the little watch-dog, as though warning him against raising an alarm by pistol or voice.

"It's you, Daddy Dead-Eye!" hoarsely muttered the little man as he strode silently forward, his eyes gleaming and glowing under the starlight. "It's you—playin' the spy on my house!"

There was more of pain than of anger in his face and tones, and even the Despot of Dew Drop seemed to recognize this fact. He bent forward until their eyes could fairly meet, his hairy paws resting on the shoulders of his lieutenant, his voice sounding almost musical.

"Not with evil intent, Perley, be sure of that! You have nothing to fear from espial, least of all from me."

"I'm responsible for what my wife says or does, you want to b'ar in mind, boss," coldly uttered the watch-dog, striving hard to read the whole truth in that frightfully scarred countenance. "I don't know how much or how little you've ketched my listenin' in yender, but this I do know: ef they's anythin' to settle, it's me you want to fetch the bill ag'inst—not my woman."

Daddy Dead-Eye drew back a pace, brushing a hand across his brow with that old curious movement. Even by that dim light, Perley Grace could detect a puzzled light in his dark eyes.

"Your woman? Was she there?" the deformed giant muttered slowly. "I do not know—I cannot recall—I can see only that girl with hair of silk and eyes of jet! I can only hear her voice, so like—"

He ceased speaking with a start, flashing his eyes about them as though suspecting evil watching. Then, without a word to Perley Grace, he turned and strode rapidly away from the building.

Although he had said nothing, made no sign, the little man in gray kept close to his heels. More than ever he reminded one of a faithful watch-dog.

As they neared the outskirts of Dew Drop, an armed man suddenly rose up before them with sharp challenge, but a quick word from Perley Grace opened the way. As for Daddy Dead-Eye, he seemed to see and hear nothing of all this, striding on with bowed head, apparently unconscious of his own actions.

Clearing the mining-town, he still strode on, closely followed by his faithful lieutenant, until the base of the cliff above which Vesta Massey had the day before been brought to bay by the bloodhounds from Deseret, was reached. Here Daddy Dead-Eye seated himself on a flat-topped boulder, at the same time motioning Perley Grace to be seated.

It was his first sign that he knew of his guard, but the little watch-dog made no comment. In silence he seated himself, looking up to his master for further instructions or wishes.

These were slow in coming. Daddy Dead-Eye, looking strangely pale and haggard in the dim light of the twinkling stars, sat in silence, one hand supporting his chin as he stared steadily with his single eye toward the town they had just left.

A grimly grotesque figure he appeared, just then, but he could not have been all evil, or

Perley Grace would have watched him with other eyes. An honest man himself, the little watch-dog could not have so blindly served a thoroughly wicked creature.

Daddy Dead-Eye was the first to break the silence which reigned for so many minutes.

"That is a good woman of yours, Grace. See that you guard her well from all temptation. See that you never neglect her, really or in seeming. Make much of her, my friend, for a true, loving, faithful woman is a pearl above price!"

Perley Grace shifted uneasily on his seat, stealing a furtive glance into that scarred face to make sure it was not all a biting sarcasm. What had Daddy Dead-Eye heard while spying at his house? Had the women been talking too much? Had his own suspicions been correctly founded: had Roxanna been won over to the side of her fair young charge so far as to promise to aid in her escape?

Ardently as he longed to learn the whole truth, Perley Grace did not dare plainly put the question. More than ever this night did he feel the strange power of this deformed being. More than ever did he feel his own helplessness before that grim autocrat of the mountains.

Still with his one eye turned toward the town, Daddy Dead-Eye spoke again, his tones low, soft, melancholy beyond anything Perley Grace had thought possible in that quarter. Never before had he known the Despot of Dew Drop to fall into a mood like this.

"It is so easy to take the first false step, lad! So hard to retrieve oneself after that step is taken! You know that you love her above all women. You take it for granted that she knows this full well, and that she is happy and content in that knowledge. But you must not make that mistake, Perley! Steer clear of that danger, if you would be happy and blessed to the end!"

"Never tire in telling your wife that you love her, and her alone! Never look at it as an old story. She will listen gladly, never fear, though you repeat the same words over and over without change. And when you are forced to go away and leave her for a time, be sure she will sing the same song to herself. And that will prove her safeguard through all temptation! That will keep her feet in the right path. For when a woman is fully assured of her husband's perfect love and faith, she will never betray him or her own truth!"

Daddy Dead-Eye gave a sudden start, as if at the sound of his own voice. Little wonder, Perley Grace caught himself thinking. It was so different from his usual tone; even with his eyes fixed on those moving lips, he could hardly bring himself to believe that it was really the Despot of Dew Drop talking!

With that old, familiar gesture, Daddy Dead-Eye cleared his vision, tossing back his iron-gray locks, shaking his gigantic frame as though he would cast aside all morbid fancies. And when he spoke again, it was in cold, hard, emotionless tones:

"I want you to send me a keen-nosed trailer, Grace; one that will not yield to ordinary obstacles, and who is not afraid of hard work. You can find such a man?"

The little man in gray hesitated a brief space, then replied:

"Thar's Jimmy Dugan, boss. He ain't much fer looks, but I'd match him against the keenest bloodhound I ever met, fer close an' thorough work on a blind trail."

"If you recommend him, no doubt he'll serve my purpose. You think you can find him to-night?"

"Ef he's in town; which I'm pritty sure he is."

"Bring him here to me, then. I'll wait for you where I am."

Perley Grace rose from the rock, but hesitated to start. There was a troubled light in his eyes and his tones were unsteady as he said:

"I'm hopin' you didn't hear nothin' to stir up hard feelin's down to my shanty, boss? You know how wimmen will chatter, when they think they're all by thar own selves. An'—"

"Surely you're not doubting your wife, Grace?" with a peculiar smile lighting up his scarred face.

"I don't. But you don't know her so well as me, boss. An' she's got a heart so tender an' lovin' that mebbe—but listen to me, Daddy Dead-Eye," with sudden sternness such as he had never before dared assume in that presence, "She's my wife. I love her heap more then I keer fer my own life. An' ef it comes to pickin' 'twixt her an' you, you'll feel my grip at your throat an' my knife at your heart!"

"Then let us hope that the necessity for such a choice will never arise, Perley," laughed the Despot of Dew Drop, but with an underlying current of fierceness in his tones that could not be mistaken. "I like you. I respect her. But no one or two lives shall come between me and the end I have in view. Now go, and send or bring Jimmy Dugan to me."

Awed, uneasy, filled with forebodings of coming evil, Perley Grace obeyed without another word. And Daddy Dead-Eye, seated on the flat rock, watched his little form fade away in the shadows.

"He's a plucky little rascal, and means all he says, but he mustn't cross my trail in this, if he wants to sport gray hairs!" grimly muttered the deformed. "It's all uncertain and shadowy as yet. I can't see clear through the mist. But—if it is true—if the phantoms turn out to be more than empty visions!"

He started to his feet, his hairy hands tightly clasped about his hotly throbbing temples. His head was thrown back, and his throat swelled as though he was choking. For a brief space it seemed as though his haunting doubts—his fears and hopes—would bring back the fit in which he had so nearly expired but a few hours before.

It was a hard fight, but Daddy Dead-Eye gained the mastery over himself, and when Perley Grace returned, accompanied by a figure even more diminutive than himself, thin and shadowy, the Despot of Dew Drop was coldly, calmly awaiting their coming.

"This is the man I told you 'bout, boss," uttered Grace.

"I recognize him now, and I reckon he'll serve my purpose. You're willing to work for good pay, I suppose, Dugan?"

"Faith an' I am, yer hanner," was the prompt response.

"Very well. I'll give you your instructions presently. Grace?"

"Ready, boss!"

"Keep an eye open until I come back. See that none of the strangers leave town before then. I'll be responsible, in case you have to use force. Now, Dugan: if you will come with me," added Daddy Dead-Eye, turning and walking along the base of the cliff at a rapid pace.

CHAPTER XXV.

A BREATHING SPELL.

AFTER the storm comes a lull, as a rule. And there was no exception, in this case.

Dew Drop had witnessed a rather exciting night, all things considered, but dawn found the town quiet and peaceable. And as the hours went by, every one seemed to settle down in his or her wonted place.

Not that all was content in Dew Drop. There were uneasy minds, troubled hearts, seething passions seeking safe vent. And among them all, Wallace Massey and his companions from Deseret suffered the most.

Not but that their purely physical wants were well cared for. Perley Grace, still in command, was not one to neglect this. Food, drink and all other comforts were plentifully supplied the prisoners; for such in reality they felt themselves.

True, there were no armed guards planted before the door of the little cabin assigned them. They were at liberty to leave the building whenever they saw fit to do so. But Perley Grace had coldly warned them against seeking to leave town.

"It'll only make more trouble ef you try it on, gents," he said, gravely. "I ain't sayin' it's right. I ain't sayin' it's lawful. All I know is that I've got orders to see that you're ready to turn up when the boss crooks his fingers. An' you'll be thar, livin' an' sound ef you're sensible, but you'll be thar, anyway."

And hardly as the Mormons chafed against restraint, they were keen enough to realize what that last sentence contained. Living or dead!

Wallace Massey ventured out as far as the little home of Perley Grace, and secured a brief interview with the maiden over whom he still claimed the rights of a father. Vesta met him, but only in the presence of Mrs. Grace. She listened to his arguments in silence, but when he urged her to admit and yield to his claims, she coldly, gravely refused.

"You are not my father. And even if you were, you forfeited all claims when you struck me—when you so brutally flogged my mother for defending her own child."

"And that being so, Mr. Massey," briskly uttered Roxanna, sweeping in between them, "you'll be so kind as to take yourself out of my house before I waste this kettle o' hot water. Scat, you ugly rascal!"

Cursing below his breath, Wallace Massey beat a hasty retreat, to find a certain degree of consolation when he reached the cabin where Link Loper met him with a wide grin of gratified mischief.

"I knowed it from the werry fu'st!" that gaunt rascal laughed, rubbing his horny palms together until they rattled and grated like a serpent coiling on itself. "I knowed that I could fetch Hairy Dick over to our side in a hurry, long's I had the yaller dingbats to shake music in his two ears—yas, I did, now!"

"Then you think—" eagerly muttered Massey, his evil eyes all aglow with anticipated triumph.

"Waal, I jest reckon!" grinned the bony spy. "When and how?" impatiently demanded the Mormon leader.

Link Loper touched his lip with a look of warning as a footstep sounded without the little cabin. The steps passed by, but the cunning rascal was not to be caught napping, and it was only after he had left the room and made sure no eavesdropper was near at hand, that he ventured to make his meaning clear.

"We hain't jest picked out all the de-tails, ye know," he uttered in guarded whispers as the others gathered close around him in the center of the room, "but it'll work—slick as slidin' down a greased flume!"

"If it does—if you succeed in getting the girl safely out of Dew Drop—I'll weight your hands down with gold coins!" eagerly muttered Eli Prosser, his little eyes all aglow.

"That's what I told Hairy Dick, an' he jest jumped at the chaine! He ain't a durned bit in love with that pesky Daddy One-Eye, an' he'd give his left hand fer a fa'r chaine to git even with the little cuss. An' so—this is pritty nigh the way we reckon to work it."

In still lower whispers Link Loper briefly outlined their project as far as it had been decided upon. Silently the two leading Mormons listened, and as the gaunt spy concluded, their hands grasped his in a vigorous clutch, to seal the compact.

Meanwhile, Finger-ring Johnny, with his right arm carefully bandaged, was being cared for and watched over by Lightning Kate, whose brow was anything but smooth and placid as she listened to the words spoken by the honest little sport.

"He gave me my life, and I'd be worse than an idiot to doubt it, you see, Kate! I never suspected him of being such a marvelous hand at a snap-shot, else I'd have insisted on fighting across a handkerchief. But now I'm glad I didn't. I'd hate to have his blood on my hands, even in the grave!"

"You're a fool, Johnny!" murmured Lightning Kate.

But as she softened her speech with a light kiss on his fevered brow, Finger-ring Johnny smiled as though fully content to be an idiot.

On the other hand, George Penny was occupying his room at the hotel, waited upon by a less favored if more highly flavored nurse than fell to the lot of his little rival.

Larry Pinkston, no doubt with one eye to the gold won from Lightning Kate by "coppering" the queen, promptly took possession of the wandering sport the instant he learned of his having been wounded by that chance shot. And as he had no other in mind whom he could even pretend to call friend, George Penny yielded to the persistent bummer.

On inspection his wound proved more annoying than serious, though his had really been a narrow escape from death. The bullet had struck a rib, then glancing to emerge a few inches from the point of entrance. With his hurt washed and bandaged, the gambler soon felt nearly as well and sound as ever, though he preferred to keep to his chamber for the time being. And by sending Larry Pinkston out on frequent trips of espial and observation, he kept himself fully informed as to the state of affairs in town.

Through him Penny learned that nothing had as yet been seen or heard of Daddy Dead-Eye; that the Mormons were still in town; that Vesta Massey remained under charge of Perley Grace and his good wife, seemingly growing content with her lot.

But that was only in outward seeming. Worrying over her sick mother, the maiden from Deseret was only kept up by a steadily growing hope of escape through the aid of kindly Roxanna Grace.

Not that the motherly dame promised in so many words to assist her fair guest. Though her full sympathy was plainly won by the maiden, Roxanna still hesitated on account of her husband.

From him she had learned the wishes of Daddy Dead-Eye, who had placed him in sole charge until his return to Dew Drop.

"And you couldn't have the heart to ask me to put Perley in a box, I know," she would declare, half-whimpering, her kindly nerves sorely shaken by her fight with friendship against loyalty to her husband.

"He is a man, and able to defend himself," Vesta would argue, eagerly. "If it was only my own welfare, I would meekly bow to your wishes, trusting in Heaven to see me safely through the toils. But it is more—a thousand times more! It is mother—ill, perhaps dying! I can hear her moaning and calling for me—for all she has left in the world to love and care for—to love and care for her in return."

"Don't—don't talk that way, deary," whimpered Roxanna, with a sadly damp apron going up to her eyes.

But Vesta persisted, unable to obey. She felt that her all was at stake, and if words and tears could gain her end, those must not be spared. With her own cares and griefs and hopes in view, she could not fully appreciate the embarrassing situation in which this honest woman was placed by her conflicting sense of duty and her great sympathy.

With brief pauses, Vesta kept up her efforts, each time feeling a growing hope of ultimate success, but not giving over on that account. She would be satisfied only when Roxanna should positively pledge her honor to aid in her escape.

And so it came about that poor Mrs. Grace passed a most wretched day, granted hardly five consecutive minutes of respite. And so plainly

did she show this that even Vesta felt brief pangs of compunction.

They were seated in the cosy front room, as the sun declined in the west. The door was open, both to admit the cooling air and to warn them of comers. For Vesta was still harping on the same well-worn string, all the more eagerly that she saw Roxanna plainly weakening in her resistance. And seeing this, the maiden was pressing her advantage hardly, forgetful of all else for the moment.

Thus it chanced that neither woman perceived the approach of a bowed figure until it fairly darkened the door. Then, with a cry of fright, Mrs. Grace sprung from her chair and fled to the other room, leaving her fair guest to confront Daddy Dead-Eye himself.

Pale, haggard, as though he had suffered much since she last saw him, the Despot of Dew Drop forced a faint smile as he saw the maiden shrink back in her chair with a look of hunted fear in her dark eyes.

"May I come in, Miss Massey?" gently uttered Daddy Dead-Eye.

CHAPTER XXVI.

BEATING AGAINST A ROCK.

THERE was no immediate reply. Vesta returned his gaze, shivering, shrinking, a strange sense of awe mingling with repulsion. And she was wondering with sickening dread whether he had long been listening.

If so, what would become of the hopes in which she had begun to indulge? What steps would he take to hinder her longed-for escape?

"Is it always so with your sex, I wonder?" asked Daddy Dead-Eye, his scarred features distorted still further by what was doubtless intended for a smile, as he stepped inside the room, seating himself in the chair so hastily vacated by Mrs. Grace. "Are they all forbidden to look deeper than the skin? Is outward beauty alone to attract them? Is it moral deformity alone that they can endure?"

Though his tones were low, even, almost gentle, a vivid glow filled his single eye, and Vesta Massey felt almost as though its gaze was scorching her face. Knowing as she did the wonderful influence of this strange being over Dew Drop and its inhabitants, and how much might be accomplished by winning his good will, she vainly tried to crush down the dread and horror with which he inspired her.

Poor girl! Strive as she might, only an inarticulate sound escaped her lips, and she felt her face growing more and more ashen.

That contorting smile quickly died away as Daddy Dead-Eye watched the maiden, and his single eye seemed to increase in fire as he said:

"Even you are one of the many, though I looked for better things, when I saw you so bravely facing desperate odds on the hill, yonder. I can see you shrink and shiver before me, as though worse than a plague was stalking before your eyes. Yet—you have been living in the hot-bed of Mormonism, where nearly all about you were worse than moral lepers! You called them friends. You visited back and forth. You even cared for many among them. More than that, you may have loved—"

"Pity me—spare me!" Vesta managed to utter, her thoughts solely occupied with her mother and the necessity of speedily returning to her side if she were to see her again in life. "You have the power, they tell me! You can fill my cup with joy beyond the power of speech to express, if you only will! Then—on my bended knees I pray you! Give me leave to go—to find my poor, poor mother!"

With that curious spell once broken, words came freely enough, and more eloquently than she had begged Roxanna to aid in her escape, the maiden now appealed to this Despot of Dew Drop.

He listened in silence, only his single eye betraying aught that might be construed into emotion. His scarred face was motionless, expressionless as though nothing more than some horribly cunning mask.

Even in her agitation Vesta Massey could not avoid noticing this, and meeting with no response to her prayers, she faltered, her tongue seemed to grow numb, that old dread returning by degrees.

She lay back in her chair, panting, shivering, watching him as a charmed bird might look into the eyes of a serpent. And not until it was clear she had no further plea to make, just then, did Daddy Dead-Eye part his lips in speech:

"You address me as a god, yet you look at me as if I were a devil. Which am I to place the most dependence in, Miss Massey? Which is the most truthful—your eyes or your tongue?"

His tones were even and soft as at first, but underneath his words there seemed to lie a grim sarcasm which boded ill for the maiden's hopes and prayers.

Vesta realized this, and her heart sunk still lower. Still, she strove to conquer the feeling, and managed to utter:

"I'm afraid of your decision, not your face. I am afraid you are harder within than without. If you would convert my opinion, show yourself kind and true and generous! Grant

my prayers—let me go back to my poor mother!"

"Still harping on that string?" with a slight frown. "Always your mother—never a word of your father?"

A hot flush leaped into the face of the maiden, and became fixed on her cheeks. Her dark eyes glowed vividly. That sneering remark seemed to be just what she lacked at first.

"I have no father living," she coldly uttered.

Daddy Dead-Eye brushed a hand quickly across his brows, which appeared to be a habit of his whenever anything occurred to puzzle him. For a brief space he gazed steadily into her face, then spoke:

"I know I have not been myself for several days past. Something in the air has not agreed with me. At times, even, I fear I have been on the verge of going crazy. But—was it only one of the wild fantastic fancies which flock to my poor brain at such times? Or did I really see and hear a man claim you as his daughter?"

Slowly, gravely, at times even painfully, the giant deformed uttered these sentences. And though, at first, Vesta doubted his sincerity, by the time he ended she felt convinced that he was in earnest; she felt that he had forgotten much, if not all, that had occurred on the plateau the day before.

Little by little she was losing her strange fear of this strange being. The more she saw of him, the more nearly human he appeared, despite the almost awful disfiguration to which fate had subjected him. And with hope slowly reviving, she made reply:

"You saw and heard such a man, but he lied while making his claim. Wallace Massey is no father of mine. Not a drop of his blood flows in my veins—and every time I recall this blessed fact, I feel like giving thanks to Heaven that it is thus!"

"I can see his face as through a mist," muttered Daddy Dead-Eye, passing a hand across his brow. "It is not a good face. More and more it looks to me like the face of a false heart—an evil brain! And you say he is not your real father?"

For the moment Vesta Massey forgot that hideously-scarred face. She leaned forward in her chair, speaking rapidly, earnestly, her dark eyes glowing, her cheeks burning with mingled anger and shame:

"My father? Would a father treat his grown-up daughter as Wallace Massey has treated me? Would he beat her, brutally as ever an overseer beat an unruly slave in the days of old? Would he curse and rage at her, with a tongue so foul and vicious that the heavens ought to have opened up to hurl a thunderbolt upon his impious, blaspheming head? My father? Thank Heaven, once more, he is no father of mine!"

"You do not look a girl to deserve such harsh treatment," slowly uttered Daddy Dead-Eye.

"Shall I tell you my prime sin?" cried Vesta, with proudly curling lip. "Nothing nor more nor less than refusing to become the wife of a man who had already three living wives?"

"After all, you were living among Mormons. Such unions are no sins in their sight. And you—were you brought up in that faith?"

Vesta hesitated, the warm color fading out of her cheeks at this cold, deliberate question. As her excitement increased, Daddy Dead-Eye appeared to grow colder, steadier, more like the grim tyrant she had until a few minutes ago ever regarded him. And noting this, her hopes began to ebb most painfully.

"If so, it was always turned the brightest side our way," she at length forced herself to utter. "Up to the day when Eli Prosser came with Wallace Massey to tell me that I was to be sealed to that fat brute, I had hardly given the matter a serious thought. I was too young to have many serious thoughts. And then, as Wallace Massey brought no second wife home, it always seemed to me as a matter separate and distinct from *our* lives. I knew, after a vague, uncertain fashion, that men and women lived together, much as animals flock for company; but until that day I never really understood what it all meant."

"Then you fled from home, if I remember right? Yet it was no sin your father contemplated, according to your and his religion. I fear you have put yourself in the wrong, Miss Massey," gravely uttered the deformed giant, his one eye glowing curiously.

"I am sorry to hear you say that, yet it is no more than I ought to have expected, after your actions up yonder!" flashed the maiden, for the moment carried away by hot passion, for the moment forgetting how much depended on her gaining the good-will of this grim autocrat. "But I defy you, even as I have and still defy them both! I tell you, as I told them, that I will take my own life rather than submit to the evil desires of that brute, Eli Prosser! I'd choose death, a thousand times over, sooner than such utter degradation!"

Something in the grim face before her warned Vesta Massey that she was periling her dearest hope, and with a sudden change in tone and manner, she left her chair, dropping to her knees before the Despot of Dew Drop, passionately pleading for mercy, for pity, for aid.

"Save me from this, if there is a spark of hu-

manity in your bosom! Do not force me into those horrible arms! Let me go—let me flee while they are off their guard—let me go back to my poor, ailing, dying mother! Grant me this, and I'll spend my days in praying for your welfare—and a broken-hearted woman will bless you with her dying breath!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

AN IMPOSSIBLE CHANCE.

THE poor girl's voice choked her, but with her dark eyes, now dimmed with unshed tears, continued to plead to that grim, silent autocrat, until he gently lifted her from the floor, and placed her in a chair.

Resuming his own seat, Daddy Dead-Eye coldly responded:

"I'm sorry now that I chipped in at all. Only for that, the matter would have been settled long ago. Now—I'm in an uglier box than I ever filled before!"

"Be generous—let me go back to my mother!" sobbed Vesta.

"And if I can't? If you overrate my power?" with a faint smile.

"You can—they all look to you as master—you can do as you will, and none will dare say nay!" panted Vesta, her hopes again reviving. "I don't understand the secret of your strange power—I can't even guess from whence comes your marvelous influence—but I do know that, if you will, you can send me back to mother, and keep those cruel, evil men from pursuing me further!"

"I am not so sure of all this," was the slow response. "And I could almost wish I was not so sure of one other point: that I made some sort of pledge to those very men whom you dislike so bitterly! If I am not mistaken, I promised to hear both sides of the dispute before finally deciding."

"They will lie to you! I have told you the simple truth!"

"No doubt!" again with that fleeting smile which still further distorted those scarred features. "Yet it was a promise. And were I to agree to break that, what security could you have that I would not lie to you, as well?"

"If I am willing to risk—"

"I am not, then," with sudden harshness. "Up to date I never have consciously broken faith with friend or foe. I am too old to begin now. And having given my word, I'll keep it, let the consequence be what it may. Still—there may be another chance for you, if—"

He ceased abruptly, seeing that the maiden was no longer listening to his deliberate speech. Vesta lay back in her chair, pale, death-like. And good Mrs. Grace, seeing and hearing all through the partly-opened door, came to her aid, for the moment forgetting her great awe of this grim despot.

In silence Daddy Dead-Eye watched her tender ministrations. In silence he heard Roxanna murmur against his harsh cruelty. And when Vesta reopened her eyes, forcing a wan smile to reassure the kindly dame, he silently motioned her to leave the room.

For a single breath Roxanna rebelled. But his one eye, glowing as though backed by living fire, cowed her brief will, and she stole whimpering back to her former retreat. And without deigning to cast even a glance after her, Daddy Dead-Eye turned to the maiden.

"You think I am hard and merciless, Miss Massey. Doubtless I am. But I also believe I can be just, when justice is most needed."

"You have spoken of my marvelous power over this community, and wondered that such should be the case. In that, too, you are in a measure right. I am truly a king in Dew Drop. I have only to lift a hand, to see my wishes carried out if it lay in mortal power. With a single word I can grant life or bestow death. And yet I am a slave—to my word!"

"I believe you have spoken no more than the truth to-day. I believe you are perfectly sincere in all you have uttered. Yet, it is barely possible you may have unconsciously exaggerated. It may be that you are mistaken in some degree, as to the rights which Wallace Massey claims."

"I am not mistaken," said Vesta, with difficulty forcing herself to speak steadily, calmly, to meet that burning gaze without shivering or flinching. "I had it from the lips of my poor mother—who may even now be calling to me with the cold dew of death on her brow!"

"Instead, try to think of her as growing stronger, her sole trouble a fear for you. Try to have faith that all will come out right in the end, no matter how black the clouds may appear just now," gravely, even tenderly muttered the strange being.

Again he changed, abruptly, his voice cold and lawyer-like as he proceeded to question her about her earlier life.

"Try to look at me as a just if stern judge, Miss Massey," he added, as the maiden hesitated to answer those queries. "Bear in mind that I am to sit in judgment on this case. And if I am in full possession of your side of the dispute, it will save you many questions before a curious gathering."

Hideously scarred, grimly repulsive though he was, Vesta could not wholly avoid trusting

the strange man. Even yet she clung to hope. She had not altogether abandoned the idea of winning him over to let her go free without the knowledge of Wallace Massey and his tools.

And so she spoke of her youthful days, going back to the time when she lived far away toward the rising sun, before their removal to the land of Deseret. But she could never remember a time when Wallace Massey did not form one of the family.

"Then, after all, his claim may be just!" muttered Daddy Dead-Eye.

"They are not just!" she passionately cried. "None of his blood curses my veins! My mother told me this, and she could not speak falsely, even against the brute who whipped her until the blood ran!"

"Did she tell you of your real father, then?"

"Only that he was dead," was the slow response.

"She did not mention his name—your real surname, then?"

"I don't remember—I am not sure."

"Is not that rather curious?" smiled the deformed, his eye glowing with a reddish gleam as it rested on the pale face of the maiden whom he was questioning so closely. "Surely she ought to have armed you as thoroughly as lay in her power, against the chance of your again falling into the power of this false father. And how could she have done this more completely than by telling you who and what your own father was; by telling you all about your birth, her first husband's death, her second marriage?"

Vesta made no reply. She saw the importance of this point, yet she had no means of covering over the flaw.

"If your mother could be brought to confront this Wallace Massey, would it not be best?" slowly added Daddy Dead-Eye, his eye suddenly seeking the outside of the building. "If you would only tell me just where she might be found, I would send for her to—"

A low, frightened, yet angry cry escaped those paling lips. Vesta saw the trap into which she was being led, and all her old fears returned with doubled force.

"I'll never do that!" she panted, pushing back her chair, her eyes flashing vividly as they met his burning gaze. "Torture cannot wrest the information from me!"

Daddy Dead-Eye laughed softly, yet with evident chagrin. He was plainly annoyed, if no worse, by this passionate outburst. Yet he managed to pass it over without actually disclosing his full aims in seeking the information.

"As you seem against that idea, allow me to offer another suggestion for your consideration. You say that you would prefer death to returning to your old home under the care of Wallace Massey. You refuse the only means I see of proving him only a step father. And yet, if you cannot disprove his claims: if he swears that he is your real father, and defies all proof to the contrary: any court of justice in the land would give him possession against your unsupported word."

"Only my body—never alive!" panted the poor girl.

"That would be a costly victory for you!" laughed Daddy Dead-Eye, his tones growing harder as he proceeded. "And since you have made the threat, I will take care you never put it into execution. But as I was about to say, there is still another chance for you to foil this Mormon claimant, if you care to take it!"

"And that?" faltered Vesta, as the grim speaker paused, clearly expecting an observation of some sort.

"You are determined never to smile on the suit of Eli Prosser?"

With a shudder of intense loathing the maiden averted her head. No mere words could more plainly portray her determination, and Daddy Dead-Eye laughed harshly as he rightly interpreted her meaning.

"That narrows it down, by just one head!" he added, with a low, strange chuckle that twisted his scarred features still further out of shape. "Still, there are enough others to choose from!"

"What do you mean?" demanded Vesta, flushing hotly as she caught an inkling of his purpose, rising to her feet with proudly flashing eyes.

"To show you the only plain and sure road out of the wilderness, Miss Massey," responded the autocrat, as he also left his seat, leaning on its back, his glowing gaze riveted on her face as he added: "If you are a married woman—if you can point to your husband as a defender and guardian—that lets Wallace Massey out! Better make up your mind to marry, my dear! It will save so much trouble. And then—I've really set my heart on witnessing a wedding!"

Without another word, the strange being turned and left the house.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BOUND TO HAVE A WEDDING.

FOR a few rods Daddy Dead-Eye strode briskly after leaving the snug little home of the Graces, but then his steps slackened, his head bowed low, until finally he came to a halt, seemingly buried in deep thought.

Once or twice footsteps told of passers-by, but he paid them no attention. Curious, half-frightened eyes were watching him from more quarters than one, but if the deformed felt these, he gave no sign.

His scarred face was partly hidden by the drooping brim of his hat, but it gave ample signs of the strong if silent struggle which was taking place there in the growing twilight. More than once it seemed as if the Despot of Dew Drop would fall to the ground, once more writhing and struggling in that epileptic grasp. But as often did he succeed in fighting back that weakness.

Once more he started forward, entering the nearest saloon, and with a hurried sign calling forth a bottle of liquor. Without troubling himself with a glass, the deformed placed the bottle to his lips and swallowed more than half its contents at a gulp. Then, dropping a gold coin on the bar, he turned and left the saloon, without a word of explanation to the uneasy keeper.

Once again in the clear, fresh air of evening, Daddy Dead-Eye seemed to rapidly recover his old steadiness. His face gained a tinge of red. His one eye shone steadily. His steps became firm and even.

In all this time the deformed had not spoken to or recognized by look or sign any of those whom he met or passed nigh. And it is only another witness to his strange power over such sturdy, strong-willed men as generally comprise the citizens of a mining town, that not a word had been addressed to him, not a question asked, though hardly one in Dew Drop but knew of the curious complication which awaited solution at his hands.

What the real secret of this marvelous power, it would probably have puzzled the sharpest in all Dew Drop to tell. The simple fact remained: Daddy Dead-Eye was a power in that region. His mildest word was law inviolate. A motion of his hand was sufficient to make men do murder, or send them to their own death.

Once more cool, steady, self-possessed, Daddy Dead-Eye passed along the street, asking no questions, but heading direct for the cabin in which Wallace Massey and his companions had been placed. And though his coming was noticed by an armed man who had, until then, kept a close watch over the place and its inmates, no opposition was made to his entrance from without.

Nor from within, though how this would have been had Wallace Massey or Eli Prosser noticed his approach in time, can only be guessed.

They sprung to their feet with startled cries as Daddy Dead-Eye pushed the door wide open and crossed the threshold. A single sweep of his eye seemed to take them all in, and after that the Despot of Dew Drop confined his attentions to the two leaders of the party.

"Good-evening, gentlemen," he said, his voice evenly modulated, his manner friendly beyond what might have been expected. "I trust you have been treated with consideration, and that you have nothing to complain of, beyond a little tedious waiting for my coming?"

The two Mormons interchanged swift glances, and Eli Prosser fell slightly to the rear, leaving Wallace Massey to do the talking.

"And that would not be so bad, if we could feel sure when it was to end," quickly responded Massey, his still gray eyes trying hard to read what lay behind that cold ceremoniousness. "Or—if we knew that it would end at all satisfactorily!"

"You are complimentary," bowed Daddy Dead-Eye, with a smile that only served to render his scarred face still more repulsive. "I fear you are not altogether frank; surely my fellows must have ill-treated or abused you, else you would not so soon grow weary of my hospitality. Yet I bade them guard and cherish you as the very apple of my eye!"

Massey forced a laugh, his hopes rapidly declining. Somehow he felt that this strange being was mocking him!

"Perhaps that's just why we were troubled! It's not so interesting, this having every word and movement watched and mentally recorded. Particularly when one is ignorant of having given any cause for being kept under such close guard and watch! But now you have returned, of course it will all be changed. Of course you'll tell your fellows that we are free to come and go as our own wills dictate?"

Despite himself, Wallace Massey gave his last words a rising inflection, thus proving how slight faith he had in what he said. Daddy Dead-Eye smiled again, as though he noticed this.

"When you have proved your title clear, Mr. Massey."

"What do you mean by that?" sharply demanded the Mormon, his florid face turning paler, his eyes glowing uneasily.

Daddy Dead-Eye squatted down on his heels, near the open door, producing a short pipe from his pocket, filling it with tobacco and lighting it before making reply. When he did speak, his tones were harder, harsher, blunter than before.

"Sit down, Massey, unless you prefer to stand. I've got a few words to say to you and

your fellows, apart from answering that question of yours. It may take some little time. Better squat!"

Almost mechanically Wallace Massey obeyed, though had he acted on his first mad impulse he would have leaped at the throat of this giant deformed, filled with a mad lust for blood.

"I'm sorry I ever chipped into this little game of yours, old fellow, but since I have done so, I'm bound to stay until somebody is frozen out for good," deliberately uttered the Despot of Dew Drop, his one eye shining through the curling clouds of smoke.

"That somebody will not be me, unless you wring in a cold deck!"

"I'm glad to see you so mighty confident, pardner," laughed Daddy Dead-Eye, with real or admirably assumed cordiality. "It shows you've got grit enough to play your cards for all they're worth. And of all things I do despise a weak-kneed player!"

"I'm gritty, as you call it, because I know that I've right to my back. And unless you're bought over by tears on a pretty face, I'll win my rights, too!"

"Alluding to Miss Massey of course," was the cold retort. "I've just come from there. She seems even more confident than you, if possible. She vows that you are no father of hers. And to clinch the matter she swears that she will kill herself rather than yield to your care and guardianship."

"Because she's mad—crazy as a loon!" angrily muttered Massey.

"I had some such thought myself, at first," with a faint smile. "It hardly looks reasonable that so fine a fellow as yourself would be such a merciless brute as to flog two women simply because one of them refuses to marry a man at your bidding."

"It is all a lie—an infamous lie!" snarled the Mormon; but his paling face plainly turned the lie upon himself.

"All of it? I'm sorry to hear that," slowly commented Daddy Dead-Eye, his one eye shining redly in the growing gloom. "If I have a hobby, it is weddings! If one thing pleases me more than another, it is giving away a young and beautiful bride! And though I've seen better-looking grooms than—but I'm growing personal in my eagerness," bowing low toward Eli Prosser as he checked himself.

There was no immediate reply. Massey and Prosser interchanged glances, doubt and anger about equally balanced in their eyes. Was this curious character laughing at them, simply for his own amusement? Or could it be that he was throwing out a hint by which they might surely gain their desired ends?

It was a strong temptation, yet they each hesitated to reach for it, fearing some cunning trap lying just beyond.

"As I told you before," coldly added the autocrat of the mountains, pressing the glowing tobacco into the bowl of his pipe, "I almost regret having taken a hand in this little game, for good reasons. Whichever way I throw my cards, it's dead sure to offend one side or the other. And though you may find it difficult to believe after what you've seen of me thus far, I'm an ardent lover of peace and serenity. I want to be at peace with all mankind. I permit no quarreling inside my limits, if I can prevent it, and I generally do, if I have to fight to maintain peace."

There was something peculiarly grim about this conclusion which sent a cold shiver over the two Mormons. They felt that Daddy Dead-Eye was laughing at them, and their hopes lowered accordingly.

"But having chipped in, I had to keep on playing, and so I called on the young lady to obtain her side of the dispute. She gave it to me with apparent frankness. She was not sparing of words, though they contained more invective than argument. And among other things, she declared that you were only a step-father. That her mother married you while she, the girl, was but little more than an infant. And she declared her real name was not Massey, but—"

The speaker abruptly paused, a puzzled look stealing over his scarred face, one hand rising to thoughtfully rub his temples.

"Strange!" he murmured, barely above his breath, his one eye staring with seeming vacancy into the pale face of the Mormon. "Queer how I could forget so soon! She told me twice—what was the name?" with startling abruptness.

But if he hoped to surprise Wallace Massey into a confession that would still further arm the girl whom he claimed as a daughter, Daddy Dead-Eye counted without his host. The Mormon shook his head with a plainly forced smile, saying:

"I'll never tell you! If the woman I married ever had another husband, she kept the fact marvelously from my knowledge. But I can take oath that the child was born more than a year after I married her mother!"

A darkly troubled look crept into the face of the deformed. He sent out the blue smoke in rapid, strong puffs until his face was hidden behind the scented clouds. And when he spoke again, his tones were colder, harsher than ever:

"There's a lie out somewhere, and I'll get at the truth if it takes a year! I hoped all would go smoothly, since I had to untangle the matter, but if it don't—let the one who makes the snarl take heed!"

Eli Prosser, dissatisfied with the manner in which his partner had conducted the affair thus far, suddenly pushed himself forward, speaking rapidly, bluntly, straight to the mark as he viewed it.

"Look here, stranger, let's you and I see if we can't come to some friendly understanding about this bungle. I don't pretend to know just who and what you are, but I've seen and heard enough to feel sure your will is all-powerful in this region. I know that you can easily bring about what we wish most, if you make up your mind that way."

"I'm a man of business, from the word go! What I say I'll stick to through thick and thin. For reasons of my own, I've set my head on marrying this girl. I'll treat her like a queen. I'll smother her in gold and finery, if I get a chance. And if you'll bring this about—if you'll contrive it so that I can make her my wife, legally if not willingly—I'll pay you whatever sum you demand for your time and bother. And if you can't trust my word, I'll leave the girl in your hands until I can plank down the clean, hard cash! Name your figures!"

Daddy Dead-Eye steadily watched the flushed face of the speaker until he finished, then he rose to his feet, putting away his pipe.

"I'm bound to make a bridal show out of this little tangle, but as yet I haven't picked out the happy groom. It may be you—it may be another; for instance, that reckless sport who chipped in against such heavy odds, up yonder, with a nod in the direction of the plateau. "Or—who knows?" with a low, mocking laugh wrinkling his scarred features as he moved toward the open door. "It may even be Daddy Dead-Eye himself! Why not? By Jove! it's worth thinking over, anyway!"

Leaving the Mormons the picture of consternation, the deformed giant crossed the threshold and strode rapidly away through the night.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A GENEROUS FRAUD.

If the visit of Daddy Dead-Eye to the building occupied by Perley Grace and his wife wrought nothing else, it made one strong partisan for the hunted maiden. And with his departure went the last lingering doubts of the honest Roxanna.

"The hideous brute!" that kindly dame was saying, her motherly arms wrapped tightly about the yielding form of the bitterly sobbing maiden. "We'll see! I'll show him! Yes, I just will!"

Ever since first learning of the trials and tribulations which had beset the pathway in life of her unexpected guest, the kind-hearted woman had been trying to devise a method of saving her from her enemies without too deeply compromising Perley Grace. Only her almost superstitious fear of Daddy Dead-Eye had held her sympathy in check until now. She felt that any false move on her part, would surely bring harm upon her husband; and she loved him too dearly for that.

"But it's some different now," she added after having partially quieted the unnerved maiden. "The master—for Daddy Dead-Eye is the master, ugly brute though he may be! The master has come back, and that takes most of the weight off my man's shoulders. He was up all last night, and hasn't dared catch even a wink to-day. He'll be rare sleepy when bedtime comes again!"

Roxanna stepped on tiptoe to the door, to make sure no person was moving about close enough to make her next speech dangerous, then she hurriedly whispered in Vesta's ear:

"If he shouldn't be—for, little as you may think him, my Perley can stand what would kill two horses! If he shouldn't be ready for bed and a sound sleep, I'll—for your sweet sake, deary!—I'll fix his coffee so he'll never wake up before morning, though the sky was to crack open and tumble down like a sheet! Now, then!"

It was just as well that honest, kindly, tender-hearted Roxanna had reached her climax, for those tightly clinging arms and smothering lips would surely have prevented further speech. And for the next few minutes, the two women were hugging closer than lovers!

It seemed too good to be true, and for a long time Vesta feared that something untoward would come between her and escape, even yet. But Roxanna, now that she had decided to take such an important step, grew enthusiastic over their cunning plot, and was not long in reassuring her new friend.

"You needn't fret your dear heart over it a single bit!" she confidently declared. "Thanks to my blessed teeth, I've used quarts of lodlum, and know all about it, just as if I had a framed diploma to show on the wall. You just rest easy, and leave all that to me, deary!"

In their excitement, neither of the women gave a thought to what was to happen after the town was once cleared. Beyond making secret

provision of food they counted no further. And if Vesta had thought of it, she would never have flinched from such a long and weary tramp on foot through the mountains. All she cared for now was a chance to flee from the spot which gave shelter to her loathed and hated enemies.

Under Roxanna's advice, Vesta retreated to the one bedroom which the little house afforded. It lay side by side with the kitchen, back of the front or "living room." It had but a single window, too small for even her slender figure to be forced through, and could not be left without passing through the front room.

"I'll tell my man that you're down with a sick headache," laughed Roxanna, growing more and more cheerful as she elaborated her generous fraud. "He knows what that means, from me, though you mightn't think it, to see how big and hearty I look. And that will ease his mind if he should notice the smell of lodlum, for nothing else can bring me rest, in them awful spells."

She insisted on supplying Vesta with food sufficient for a dozen, because she must keep her strength up, and she packed a goodly bundle with food as well.

"It'll come handy out in the hills, you know, deary," she said, with a sudden catching of her breath, and another fervent hug. "I've a good mind to go 'long—and I would, only for my poor man!"

It was a deliciously exciting time to her, kind heart! and she hugely enjoyed the plotting, too, little dreaming how it was all to turn out in the end.

And it was only when Perley Grace, worn and weary through loss of sleep as well as the great weight which had rested on his mind, came in, that Roxanna managed to settle down to preparing supper. She tried faithfully to compose her face, but if Perley Grace had not been so nearly worn out, body and mind, he could hardly have helped having his suspicions excited by her unusual demeanor. As it was, he attributed it all to her interest in the stranger, whom she declared was dreadfully sick with a racking headache.

"And no wonder, if I do say it!" she sputtered as she hid her tell tale face over the frying-pan. "That ugly critter—that odious hunchback, Daddy—just pestered the life and heart all out of her this evening! For my part, I can't see—"

"Then I wouldn't try, Roxy," sharply interjected her husband.

When he used that tone, Roxanna knew that it would be wise to change the subject, and she did so accordingly.

She snatched time to run into where Vesta was lying on the bed, her head bound up, the scent of laudanum in the air, and in these hasty visits she completed her instructions.

She would see that Perley Grace slept that night in the front room, on a "shake-down." If he hinted at the loft, she would protest against it, as being entirely too close for comfort.

"He'll sleep like a log, what with his fatigue and the lodlum, be sure, deary. And when we're both asleep—for I couldn't think of drugging him 'thout taking my share, as a good wife always should, you know—why, you'll just steal out and tie us both up, hand and foot!"

"But—"

"You must, or I'll throw it all up, this blessed minute!" almost sternly cried the good woman, her eyes flashing. "If you didn't—if we didn't have some such good excuse as that, when you were found missing—what would become of us? What would that hunchback villain say and do? That we let you off, knowingly. And then he'd bloody-murder us both—I just know he will."

She fled to finish her cooking, lest her good man's suspicions be awakened by her prolonged absence. And while she was gone, Vesta thought it all over to herself.

It seemed hard, cruel, barbarous to so treat the woman who was daring the anger of her loved husband in her behalf. And yet—there was shrewd sense in her reasoning, too. In no other way could the real facts be so thoroughly concealed from the despot.

"Promise me by your love and hopes for your mother, that you'll do just as I say," hurriedly urged Roxanna, on her next flying visit to the chamber. "If you don't, I won't go an inch further—so there!"

Accordingly, Vesta promised, and the kind heart was content.

Without awakening the suspicions of her husband, Roxanna managed to thoroughly drug his strong coffee, not forgetting to supply her own cup with an equal dose. And, feeling that she was defrauding him in a good cause, the poor woman laughed merrily as she saw him swallow the potion and pass his cup for another dose.

After this, she hastened her work, clearing the table and leaving the dishes for washing until morning. She made a comfortable bed on the floor, and Perley Grace quickly sought it, yawning, his eyes already closing with fatigue and the potent drug. And Roxanna, herself, could hardly keep going long enough to finish her preparations and to pay a last visit to the anxiously-waiting maiden.

"Don't be in too big a hurry, and so spoil everything, deary. Be sure to wait until my man gets good and fast asleep before you touch him. As for me," with a sleepy laugh, "I wouldn't move a muscle if you tickled the feet off o' me."

And then, with arms about each others' necks, the two women embraced as warmly, as earnestly and lovingly as though they were children of one mother, parting forever.

"God bless and guide you, deary!" murmured Roxanna, gulping down her tears lest Perley should deem them suspicious even in his sleepy state, then tearing herself away before the agitated maiden could speak.

She turned the light low, then lay down by the side of her husband, who was already breathing heavily, though he muttered something and stirred slightly as he felt her good-night kiss on his lips.

Vesta saw this, and her eyes filled with tears. Truly, this world was not so bad. This one kind, generous heart made amends for much.

Minute after minute, until the clock slowly ticked off a full hour, she waited, though it seemed an age in her present excited, agitated condition. Then, softly, silently, she slipped from bed, and bundle of provisions in hand, stepped out into the dim light. For a single breath she was tempted to at once leave the house to take up her flight, but then she banished the thought.

"I promised her—I will keep my word and bind them!"

CHAPTER XXX.

A DASTARDLY DEED.

LINK LOPER grinned broadly as he nodded his approval of the lay-figure deposited in the darkest corner of the cabin, and which had taken the greater portion of his clothing to manufacture.

"I don't reckon it'll be really needed," he said, as well as he could for the feeling of mirth which this "double" excited in his manly bosom. "But ef it does, they ain't nobody gwine fer to smoke the cheat 'less they try fer to give it a clean up-an'-down hug fer love!"

"It's a risk we've got to run, and the prize is well worth it all!" uttered Eli Prosser, his little eyes glowing, his thick lips coming together with an audible smack. "As for you—do your work, and I'll settle all bills! I'll make you both rich for life!"

"There's no one in sight, just now," hurriedly muttered Wallace Massey, coming from the front of the little cabin. "Better make a steal of it right away, Link. And remember where we're to meet you. The least error or miscalculation might prove fatal!"

"Talk enough, an' hyar goes fer the puddin'!" grinned the lank rascal, as the light was turned out to still further conceal his leaving the building.

Once fairly outside, the bony spy proceeded with all due caution on his mission, chuckling afresh whenever his hands happened to touch the garments which had been substituted for his own ragged clothes, now lying as a cunning decoy in the corner of the cabin.

"What ef the pizen one-eyed critter does come nosin' 'round the place? What ef he does git thar afore the time fer 'em all to make a break fer the hills? Not a durned bit to me, while I'm layin' thar like a sick kitten huggin' up to a hot brick!"

Although Link Loper had not been much abroad that day, he was a natural-born scout and spy, and had every rod of Dew Drop mapped out in his head, until, if necessary, he could have found any particular spot within its limits while securely blindfolded. So, though the night was dark, and its only light the twinkling stars until the moon should rise, he stole silently, rapidly along to the point where Hairy Dick had agreed to meet him.

For Link Loper had made his exultant assertion good. He had corrupted the already discontented member of Daddy Dead-Eye's body-guard, and together they had agreed to abduct Vesta Massey from the guardianship of Perley Grace.

"It's you, then?" growled the hairless traitor, rising up from his covert when fully assured of the shadow's identity. "Durned ef I didn't pritty nigh 'clude you'd gone back onto the hull job!"

"The world wasn't made in a minnit, pard," chuckled Link Loper, as a keen glance about assured him they were alone together, with no other person in sight. "So fur from goin' back—grip these pritty bits, once!" and he dropped a number of golden coins into the eager hand of the traitor. "It's jest a primin', not a full load, ye want to understan', pardner. 'Course the boss couldn't tote a hull gold-mine 'long in the pocket of 'im. But it'll show ye what's layin' ahead o' us both. No more niggerin' fer us, oncet we make this raffle all right!"

"Le's git at it, then," mumbled Hairy Dick, his eyes glowing avariciously in the darkness. "I'm raal hongry fer to even-up with that Perley Grace, too! Ef I could only be whar I could see the boss shake the daylight out o' him fer losin' his grip onto the gal, I'd be too bloody happy fer to keep on livin'—so I jest would!"

"As fer me, reckon I'd ruther be furdur," drily commented Link Loper, as he stole silently along through the gloom toward the little cabin where Vesta Massey, even at that moment, was dreaming of freedom and reunion with her mother.

Without a sound to betray their purpose, the two rascals neared the building, thanking their lucky stars that it stood partly isolated and in a usually quiet portion of the mining town.

"But durn the light!" suddenly muttered Link Loper, his little eyes snapping angrily as they caught a faint glow through the front window, unseen until they fairly turned the corner of the house.

"Mebbe it ain't so bad, yit!" ventured Hairy Dick, stealing past his gaunt comrade on tiptoe, pausing only when his nose almost touched the window, across which a curtain was drawn.

It proved impossible for him to obtain a view here, but he was not to be so readily baffled. A sweeping glance around showed him a narrow line of light sifting under the door, and in another instant he was on his knees, his head twisted sideways, one eye close to the narrow crack and greedily drinking in a startling scene beyond the barrier.

Link Loper, trembling with excitement and suspense, instinctively felt that Hairy Dick was making some unexpected discovery, but he only dared question him by tapping on his bent back with the tip of a finger.

Without a word Hairy Dick drew back, motioning Link to take his place at the inconvenient spy-hole.

Prepared though he was for something out of the ordinary run, Link Loper could hardly suppress the cry of wondering joy that leaped to his lips as he looked through the narrow crack.

He saw Perley and Roxanna Grace lying on the floor, with Vesta Massey bending over them, her hands nimbly knotting ropes about their feet! And though his view was only partial, he could see enough to assure himself that she had already bound the arms of the sleeping pair!

"So much the easier fer us both!" softly breathed Hairy Dick in the ear of his comrade for the night. "We won't hev to down Perley, nur run any resk o' lettin' his woman yowl an' screech out like a snatch-cat! An' the gal's goin' fer to stick her pritty self right plum' into the paws o' us two gents—waal, now, who says we ain't in luck?"

Link Loper made no reply. It seemed far too good news to prove true. He had nerved himself up to the point of shedding blood, feeling almost positive that they could not steal the maiden away from Perley Grace without something of that sort. And now—to see her coolly binding her guardians, plainly bent on flight to the hills! It was too good to be believed without a desperate effort!

"She'll put out the light afore she opens the door!" added Hairy Dick, barely loud enough for those keen ears to catch. "A body that's showed sech pure grit as this, ain't gwine to be hot-headed 'nough fer to run any more chancies than she hes to, ye want to mind! An' so—when the light melts away, stan' on yon side, ready fer to grub her!"

"She won't make a yelp 'long o' my keerness, ye want to know," nodded Link Loper, his eyes glowing like those of a cat in the dark.

No further words were spoken. The two ruffians stationed themselves on either side of the door, pressing close to the wall where it would be impossible for Vesta to catch a glimpse of their forms until she had fairly emerged from the building. And then, with bated breath they awaited her coming.

Inside, the maiden was completing her work, carefully following the instructions given her by kind-hearted Roxanna Grace. She used the pliable bits of rope which Mrs. Grace provided, binding the heavily sleeping couple hand and foot, knotting the cords firmly, yet not so as to impede their circulation.

All this was done without breaking that drugged slumber, and when her task was completed, Vesta Massey knelt beside the generous woman who had dared so much in her behalf, lightly pressing her lips to her motherly face. On lips and closed eyes and forehead, with each touch dropping a tear of thankfulness and a prayer for her future welfare. Then, picking up her bundle of provisions, the maiden blew out the light and silently opened the front door, stepping out into the night with a keen and searching glance around her.

At the same instant strong hands closed upon her. A broad palm covered her lips. Another shut upon her throat, while the powerful arms of Hairy Dick wound about her body, lifting her clear of the ground and rapidly bearing her away from the front of the building.

"Grip her tight, pard!" the bald-headed rascal grated as he did this. "Ef she gits wind enough fer to let out a screech like her sort al'ays keep in stock, you'n' me'd better begin to say our leetle pray'rs in a holy hurry! Fer Daddy Dead-Eye is clean p'izen when he gits his tushes set fer sober business! Waal, now, I jest reckon he is!"

Link Loper said nothing, but he none the less fully appreciated the situation. With cruel

force he kept his hands busy, effectually checking any outcry which the damsel from Deseret might otherwise have made in her surprise.

And it was not until he felt her strained muscles suddenly relax under his hands, her head drooping limply, her throat seeming to shrink to half its former size, that he muttered warningly:

"Let up a bit, pard! The boss won't pay a durned red fer a corpus—an' she feels like she'd croaked, a'ready!"

Hairy Dick seemed nothing loth. It is one thing to talk about abducting a maiden, and quite another to carry her several hundred yards without stopping to catch one's breath. And strong though he was, his breath came fast and short as he paused, to let the limp figure slip into the arms of his comrade in evil.

"Jest fainty, like, I reckon!" said Link Loper, after a hasty examination by the uncertain light. "Good enough! We'll hev heap less bother then I dared to hope fer! Who said we ain't lucky?"

He stopped short as he glanced up into the face of his comrade. Hairy Dick was looking back toward the dark cabin, a scowl of mingled doubt and longing plainly visible to those catlike eyes.

"What is it, pardner?" whispered Link Loper, instinctively feeling for a weapon, naturally anticipating coming trouble.

"I was thinkin' what a durn shame it is fer to run away an' leave ahind us sech a nice little luck-penny as that!" grated Hairy Dick, licking his dry lips. "Shell I, pard? Shell I run back an' scoop it in?"

"Scoop what in?" demanded Link Loper, wonderingly.

"The yaller-boys Perley Grace hes got salted down fer winter days. Wouldn't we be p'izen fools fer to ferget them? I've got to do it, pard! I cain't miss sech a chaine as this, noways!" with sudden determination in voice and glittering eyes. "I won't keep ye long waitin'. Jest lay low, an' watch the gal don't yelp. It's even whack, ye know, pard!"

Before Link Loper could agree or object, the bald-headed ruffian crouched low and rapidly glided back toward the house where the man whom he so bitterly hated was lying bound and helpless, drugged to unconsciousness by the loving hands of his own wife, little dreaming how her generous fraud was to terminate.

With strange eagerness Hairy Dick stole up to the front door, his glittering eyes roving all around to make sure there was no new peril to guard against. He listened for a few moments at the door, but only heard the steady, regular, heavy breathing of the drugged couple within.

"I cain't see clean through it," he muttered beneath his breath. "It ain't like Perley fer to snooze like that, even ef he'd been 'thout sleep fer a week, let alone two nights. But even ef he should wake up an' ketch sight o' me, what could he do?"

With those thoughts humming through his evil brain, the traitor drew a long, cruel-looking knife from his belt, testing both point and edge with his horny thumb. Dark though it was, his face lit up with a fierce, devilish glow as he silently pushed open the door and stole across the threshold.

All was still, save for those regular breathings. And knowing that he would require a light, Hairy Dick struck a match and ignited the lamp where it stood on the table.

As he did so, a slight stir startled him, and turning sharply, he saw Perley Grace lifting his head from the pillow, his eyes widely opened, staring directly into that white, scared face!

With a panther-like leap, Hairy Dick alighted on his breast, his left hand clutching at the poor fellow's throat, his right rising and falling in the dim light, the cruel steel flashing for an instant. But when it rose again, to quiver over the motionless figure of Roxanna Grace, it showed a dull, sickly red!

His teeth faintly grating, his breath coming in short, labored pants, Hairy Dick steadied his hand, ready to add another dastardly murder to his long list of crimes, should the wife stir or open her eyes, roused by the faint struggles of her husband.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A MERCILESS JUDGE.

If anything, those left behind by Link Loper when he stole out to keep his appointment with Hairy Dick, had to suffer the most anxiety.

"It's the waiting in the dark!" muttered Wallace Massey.

Link Loper had calculated that two hours, at the outside, would be amply sufficient for his part of the work. At the expiration of that period, unless something unexpected should arise to hinder, the Mormons were to steal out of their cabin and endeavor to leave town, to meet the bony spy at a point which he had minutely described.

But something unexpected did happen, and that was a call from none other than Daddy Dead-Eye.

Without warning he opened the door and crossed the threshold. He grimly saluted the company, apparently not noticing their evident consternation as he squatted down near the

door, filling and lighting his pipe as though bent on having a social smoke.

With an effort Wallace Massey rallied his wits, and hoping all the time for a speedy departure, he once more ran over the arguments which he had used earlier in the evening. But kindly though the despot appeared on the surface, he did not seem inclined to yield or to recede from his original decision.

"I've settled that part of the case to my complete satisfaction," he said, coldly. "The young lady has got to have a husband. I'll give her her choice, if she shows good sense. If not, I'll pick out a man for her to suit my own mind."

The time passed with alarming rapidity, yet with terrible slowness if such a paradox be admissible. Swiftly, when they thought of the work Link Loper was accomplishing; slowly, while that scarred despot delayed his departure.

But Daddy Dead-Eye seemed to be in an unusually companionable mood, this evening, and he made no move toward cutting his visit short until the rapid sound of footsteps came to their ears, and a man paused at the door. Not to speak, but to make a signal which none of the Mormons had the clew to interpret correctly. Yet they felt a vague fear as they watched, which was only too soon confirmed by the sudden appearance, just outside the open door, of an armed squad of men whose rifles silently covered them, one and all.

At the same moment Daddy Dead-Eye cast aside his pipe, his right hand arming to cover the cowering, pale-faced Mormon, his voice hard and deadly as he uttered:

"Don't make a bad matter worse by trying to pull a gun, Wallace Massey. I don't want your blood on my hands—as yet!"

More than his pistol, those last words sent a thrill of superstitious fear over the cowering Mormon. They contained a threat vicious beyond the power of expression, he fancied. And without a word, without an effort to resist, he submitted to be disarmed by the man who came in through the doorway as Daddy Dead-Eye ceased speaking. And one by one his companions were robbed of all offensive weapons.

Another shudder ran over his frame as he noted one fact; neither Daddy Dead-Eye or his man even cast a glance toward the counterfeit of Link Loper lying in the corner as though soundly sleeping!

"Hardly that," laughed the despot, as he caught the glance which Wallace Massey cast in that direction, guided by his thought. "Link Loper didn't sell you out. What he *has* done—well, have a little patience, and you may learn through your own eyesight!"

Still in silence, the man who disarmed them, sent the Mormons one by one through the door, where each was taken in charge by two armed men. Their rifles were slung across their shoulders, but a revolver took their places, ready for use in case of need.

A growing murmur showed that Dew Drop was waking up to a consciousness of something startling being in the wind, and the armed guards closed grimly about the Mormons as Daddy Dead-Eye led the way directly for the cabin of Perley Grace.

This speedily became visible, for a huge pile of combustibles directly in front of the building was just fairly catching fire, casting its ruddy glow all about, and showing—

Daddy Dead-Eye laughed harshly as Wallace Massey gave a gasp of mingled horror and despair at the spectacle which that red light revealed: Link Loper and Hairy Dick in bonds!

"You are surprised, and so was I. I could have taken oath there was not a traitor in all Dew Drop; but you see how miserably I was duped—and by the very man whom, next to Perley Grace, I trusted!"

At that juncture, a sullen, deadly cry began to rise and swell on the night air. From the little house came a wailing, heart-broken cry, and then Roxanna Grace, pale and haggard, the picture of woe, showed for a brief space in the open door.

"My love—my husband—murdered—murdered!"

She flung up her hands and fell to the floor in a deathlike swoon.

Daddy Dead-Eye lifted his right hand, and the cry for blood was instantly stilled. It seemed the work of magic, this implicit obedience in a mob of vengeful armed men!

"I never done it! It wasn't me!" hoarsely cried Hairy Dick, pale as though death had already overtaken him, his eyes glowing like those of a wounded animal turned to bay.

Daddy Dead-Eye strode forward, his hairy hands falling on the shoulders of the ruffian, his one eye blazing vividly, seeming to burn and scorch its way to his brain. One moment thus, then the Despot of Dew Drop turned to lift his hand with a signal which was immediately interpreted by his watching men.

A dozen of them hastened away, acting in perfect concert, quickly returning with a small derrick between them, which their strong arms were not long in erecting directly before the house of mourning, in the full glow of the bonfire. And from the block at the other extremity dangled a pliable rope with a slip noose marking its end!

"You don't dast to do it!" hoarsely screamed

Hairy Dick, too plainly divining what was in store for him from this significant monument. "You don't dast to hang me, when I hain't done nothin' fer to—"

"Who cut Perley Grace?" cried a vengeful voice from the crowd.

Again that awful roar of human voices which means death to all against whom it is directed. Again did Daddy Dead-Eye prove his marvelous power, simply by flinging up his right hand. Like magic the mad uproar died away, and only the frantic struggles of the assassin with his guards broke the awful silence.

"I'll ask that question, Hairy Dick," coldly uttered the despot, as soon as the criminal ceased his worse than vain efforts. "Who stabbed Perley Grace?"

There was a brief silence during which it seemed as though all present fairly held their breath. Then, forcing a composure which he surely could not feel in reality, the accused spoke out sharply:

"I didn't, as Heaven hears me talk! I never tetched Perley—why should I? What's he ever done to me that I should hurt him?"

"That is just the point," coldly retorted the self-elected judge. "Perley Grace never knowingly wronged mortal man. He was clean white, and true to the very core! As for you—"

"They tempted me, boss," with a shivering whine in his tones that sent a thrill of disgust through more than one present. "They'd promised me big money if I'd help run off the girl, an' I was drunk, an' I giv' way to the tempter—Link Loper, my ole pard! But as Heaven hears me, I never tetched the pore feller! The gal tied 'em up—she was doin' of it when we fu'st come—an' she must 'a' stuck Perley to keep him from holdin' her back from 'scapin'! Ax Link—ax him!" turning a miserably appealing glance toward his fellow-prisoner. "We found him cut, didn't we, pard?"

"Tell the truth, as you hope for mercy, Link Loper!" cried Daddy Dead-Eye, sharply, his one eye glowing like fire.

"I didn't see no cut. I don't b'lieve he was cut, when the gal come out o' the house. An' you went back, ag'inst my wantin', pard. You said the man hed a snug nest-aig salted down, which you wanted bad!"

Hairy Dick burst into a torrent of curses and denials, which was promptly checked by a thick bandage being twisted about his mouth by his guards at a signal from Daddy Dead-Eye, who sternly commanded silence as a figure appeared in the open doorway.

It was the doctor in attendance, and he clearly stated:

"Mr. Grace is not dead. I think I may promise his life, if all goes well. He swears that he recognized his assailant, and gives his name as one called Hairy Dick!"

For a single breath the silence was complete. Then Daddy Dead-Eye lifted his right hand, pointing to the extemporized gallows.

No more was needed. With bewildering rapidity Hairy Dick was carried beneath the derrick, the noose fitted about his neck, while scores of eager hands hauled him clear of the ground to his death.

And while the mob was thus occupied and absorbed, a sign from the Despot of Dew Drop caused Link Loper to be led away through the night by his guards, while his own immediate body-guard escorted the pale and trembling Mormons back to their former quarters.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE DESPOT DELIVERS JUDGMENT.

THAT was a long and trying night to more than one in Dew Drop. Probably Wallace Massey and his fellows suffered the greatest anxiety.

As yet they knew nothing of the fate which might have overtaken Link Loper. As yet they had not even the slightest intimation from the lips of Daddy Dead-Eye as to what disposition was about to be made of themselves. But they could not help knowing that Dew Drop was fearfully excited, terribly aroused, by the unprovoked stabbing of Perley Grace. And they even fancied they could recognize allusions to themselves among the wild yells and cries that served to render night hideous. And though an armed guard steadily encircled their little cabin, they had scant faith that these grim men would or could beat back the desperate attack which was expected on the part of the mob.

But the night passed and the day steadily wore on without any supplemental tragedy. The corpse of Hairy Dick was cut down and rudely buried by those who had, up to his treachery, stood shoulder to shoulder with him as body-guard of this giant deformed.

The doctor again looked after the hurts of Perley Grace, and confidently declared that he would bring him through with flying colors.

Meanwhile, Daddy Dead-Eye was by no means idle. Grim and hard, cold as ice, save for the almost crazy glow which lit up his single eye, he passed from one to another of those most interested in the queer idea which he was nourishing in his cracked brain—for surely no man with wholly sane faculties would ever act as he was acting—as he intended to act until the coming of the end.

Landlord Johnson meekly made over to the mountain autocrat full possession of his hotel, himself falling back to obscurity again. And before the middle of the afternoon was reached a curious little drama was being enacted in the long, bare dining-room of the tavern.

Briskly, silently as his men carried out the orders given them, all this could not take place without awakening the curiosity of the citizens of Dew Drop, more especially as it chanced to be a Sunday. And though the reputation of Daddy Dead-Eye prevented any positive rupture of uninvited guests, the hotel was gradually surrounded by an eager and watchful crowd.

"Have patience, gentlemen," coldly uttered the Despot of Dew Drop from the tavern door, as he keenly swept his single eye over that excited gathering. "I promise that you shall know every thing before long, if you don't crowd us too hard. If you should be so foolish—well, undertaking will be the most profitable business in town!"

Two men with repeating-rifles stood guard at the door. Others were to be seen occasionally at the windows, and other vulnerable points, and after the significant speech from Daddy Dead-eye, there was little difficulty found in interpreting these movements. And so, with what patience they could summon, the crowd without awaited the convenience of the few within.

These were all collected inside the capacious dining-room, where Daddy Dead-Eye sat in judgment, hard, grim, more forbidding in looks than usual, if that could be. His one eye was gleaming and sparkling with doubled fire as it roved slowly around the room, as if to make sure all orders had been carried out as given.

Vesta Massey, pale and wan, showing plainly the effects of her late trials, was seated by the side of Roxanna Grace. She, too, was strangely subdued. Though the doctor assured her the life of Perley was in no actual danger, the poor woman could not forget that he owed his wound to her generous fraud.

To one side stood a tall, dark-clad figure, her face hidden by a thick veil, though this was a needless precaution. Few in Dew Drop who saw her then, could even doubt that this was Lightning Kate, the Faro Queen, even if Finger-ring Johnny, pale-faced, his right arm in a sling, had not stood close to her elbow.

In a clump, under armed guard, were Wallace Massey, Eli Prosser, Link Loper and the other Mormon tools.

Nearer Vesta Massey, George Penny was carelessly leaning over the back of a chair, while Larry Pinkston, a bottle neck peeping from each pocket, crouched humbly behind his new master.

This was what Daddy Dead-Eye saw as he looked leisurely over the room, rising from his seat, leaning his hairy hands on the little table which served him as a desk. And having completed his inspection, he spoke, in cold, measured accents that contrasted sharply with the strange, almost maniacal fire which backed his one eye.

"Ladies and gentlemen! You all of you have a more or less accurate idea of the matter which has brought us all together this afternoon. It's a peculiarly mixed-up affair, and I hardly know which end of the tangle to begin with!"

"Play Alexander, and I'll lend you my sword!" murmured George Penny, with a bland smile on his pale but handsome countenance.

Daddy Dead-Eye flashed a fiery glance toward the audacious sport, but paid no further attention to the interruption.

"I'm almost sorry I ever chipped, but now I'm fairly into the game, I'll keep the ball rolling while I've a stake left. In mercy to the rest of you, though, I'll just run over the cue case, so all can start in without asking what cards remain in the box."

Daddy Dead-Eye moistened his lips with water from a glass which stood on his desk, then rapidly summed up the case, as far as gone.

"At the bottom, lies a matter of dispute between two persons. To save time, and to spare the feelings of a lady as much as possible, I have tried to get at the bottom facts before opening this little court."

"The lady declares that she is unjustly persecuted. That the man has no claim upon her, either legal or moral. That she is not his child by blood, though she admits his marriage to her own mother. That he is nothing more than a step-parent, from whom she has fled in self-defense."

"This is, in brief, her defense. She brings serious counter-charges against the man, but we need not enter into them, at present."

"On the other hand, Wallace Massey swears that the girl is his own daughter; that he is her father in a moral as well as legal light: that she is either speaking falsely through perversity, or else she has been led astray by her mother, who joined in and encouraged her flight, while plainly in an insane condition."

A low, indignant cry from Vesta Massey interrupted the judge at this point. Daddy Dead-Eye simply smiled, and awaited until silence was once more restored.

"The young lady seems to take objection to

my words. I am deeply sorry for that, but it does not alter my position. I am simply stating both sides of the case, precisely as I learned them while striving to get at the bottom facts. If the two sides disagree, that is no fault of mine."

"In a case where there is no sure method of separating truth from lies, there is little to gain from questioning the parties concerned. If only to save themselves from punishment for perjury each one would feel bound to stick to the original story."

"In this case, I am free to admit that my sympathy, being a man, rather inclines to the side of the young lady. I believe that she has been cruelly treated by the one who claims her as a daughter. I believe that she felt fully justified in running away from home, more particularly as her own mother bore her company. And if that mother was before me, and confirmed the statement of her daughter, the solution would be easy enough. I would simply bid them go their way, and take mighty good care that the father gave them no further trouble."

"But the young lady has admitted that she is a minor, as well as a fugitive from home. Her further oath is balanced by that of Wallace Massey, and this being the case, my sympathies must go for naught, and I feel obliged to surrender her to his care, unless—"

"Never alive!" panted Vesta, with eyes suddenly blazing.

"Unless," repeated Daddy Dead-Eye, his tones as cold and hard as they had been from the very first. "Unless the young lady can point to a protector whose claims will overshadow those put forward by the man who holds out for a parent's rights. In still plainer words, Miss Massey, if you prefer marrying to going with Wallace Massey, you have only to say the word. I have a regular justice of the peace in waiting, ready to tie the knot at a minute's warning!"

There was a breathless silence at this speech, though many of those present had in a measure been expecting something of the sort. Nevertheless, it seemed to take all by surprise. To hold them spellbound for the time being. And Daddy Dead-Eye was the first one to break the almost painful silence.

"This is the only compromise I can think of. If you refuse to marry, then I must turn you over to your father, as your only legal guardian. If you require time for consideration, it shall be given you. But remember that your decision, once given, binds us all. To help you out—why not reward the young gentleman who risked his life in your cause, against heavy odds? Why not choose George Penny?"

The dark veiled figure to the rear gave a start and audible exclamation, but if he heard, George Penny never heeded. With a sudden flush upon his handsome face, he stepped to the side of the white-faced maiden, stooping until his blonde mustaches fairly brushed her ear, hurriedly whispering:

"Take him at his word, Miss Massey! Say that you will marry me, and let his tool go through the empty forms. I'm already married, with a living wife, and it will not be binding on you. I swear by the grave of my mother, that I'll never try to take advantage of you. I'll simply see you safe out of that devil's grip, and then bid you good-by!"

With his last whispered words mingled a low, mocking laugh, and glancing up, the wandering sport saw Lightning Kate throwing back her veil, her jetty orbs filled with half-malicious, half-menacing fire.

He only gave her that one glance, then fell back a pace, facing the grim judge, speaking out clear and distinct:

"If the young lady will trust in me, I'll be only too happy to save her from further trouble. And as you appear to be running this court, Daddy Dead-Eye, I ask you to give me her hand in marriage."

There was a brief silence, then Lightning Kate swept forward, pushing aside the restraining hand of Finger-ring Johnny. With her darkly beautiful countenance flushed with hot passion, she cried:

"And what of me? I swear that yonder man—George Penny—is my lawfully wedded husband! Not that I want aught to do with him—don't any of you think it for even a moment!" with a hard, reckless laugh that seemed to change her beauty to ugliness in more eyes than one. "Only—I'll never stand by in silence while another woman picks up my leavings! I forbid the banns!"

Through all this, Daddy Dead-eye stood like some distorted statue, his burning gaze roving from face to face, his scarred features gradually turning fairly livid with passion. His hairy right hand closed on the tumbler of water, and as Lightning Kate ceased speaking, the strong glass crumbled like powder. Blood marked his fingers but he seemed ignorant of the fact. The mad, blind, unreasoning fury which had gone so far toward winning for him his terrible reputation, seemed to be gaining full possession of all his faculties. His eye flashed like fire. His broad bosom swelled. His breath came in short, labored pants. And when he spoke, his voice was a subdued roar:

"Is this true, George Penny?"

"Let him deny it, if he dares!" mocked Lightning Kate.

"She was once my wife. What she is now, you who have known of her life here in Dew Drop, should be able to judge without my help," coldly responded the wandering sport.

Finger-ring Johnny started forward, revolver in hand, but at a signal from Daddy Dead-Eye, both he and Penny were caught by guards.

Eli Prosser started forward, his broad face flushed, his eyes aglow as he caught at the chance so unexpectedly offered.

"I'll marry her! Give her to me, and I'll—"

The Despot of Dew Drop broke in with a wild harsh laugh.

"Good enough! I'm bound to have a wedding, now I've set out for one, and you'll do in place of a better man! You shall have her, Eli Prosser! You shall marry her before this hour is spent!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A STRANGE BRIDAL.

SHARPLY, viciously the Despot of Dew Drop uttered these words, and he looked more like a demoniac than a human being as he leaned across the little table. His eyes glowed like a living coal. His scarred face was fairly livid. His long mustaches twisted and curled, showing his yellow teeth beneath their hairy shield, like the fangs of a hungry wild beast.

For a moment George Penny was taken all aback. Though fully convinced that this giant deformed was really insane, he was not prepared to see him go quiet so far as this. But when he heard his harsh decision, when he saw Vesta Massey sink back into the motherly arms of Roxanna Grace, a faint moan parting her pallid lips, he could bear no more.

With a violent exertion of strength, he tore free from his guard, snatching a revolver from his belt, meaning to send a bullet through that crazed brain, as the only means of saving the poor girl from a loathsome sacrifice. But before he could accomplish his ends, he was grasped by strong arms. The weapon was torn from his grasp. And then he went heavily to the floor, covered by the guards whom a single wave of the despot's hand had hurled upon him.

"Disarm, but spare him!" thundered Daddy Dead-Eye, his voice rising high above the din.

That same signal sent other men to work, and in a marvelously brief space of time, Finger-ring Johnny, Wallace Massey, Eli Prosser and all of their fellows, were wholly disarmed, a guard at each elbow.

Grimly watchful, Daddy Dead-Eye stood motionless, silent, until his men lifted George Penny to a chair, his wrists confined by steel handcuffs, a stout rope knotted about his ankles. Panting, but silent and grim, two men stood at his back with drawn revolvers. Their eyes were upon Daddy Dead-Eye, and they were ready to carry out his slightest wish without hesitation.

Of all the company, Lightning Kate alone appeared wholly content with the way matters were going. Flushed and exultant with the knowledge that she had baffled the man whom she once called husband, but whom she hated now with worse than jealousy, she laughed mockingly until a stern motion from Daddy Dead-Eye warned her not to go too far.

Eli Prosser appeared more scared than triumphant. Even after that fierce speech of the despot, he could not fully hope for success. He almost regretted having pushed himself forward so prominently, and felt a strange premonition of coming evil when the deformed giant turned that blazing orb upon his face.

"I hoped to effect a peaceful compromise by which all parties would be silenced, if not satisfied," spoke the autocrat with a forced calmness that was scarcely less terrible than his mad rage. "I tried my level best to make things go off smoothly, but I failed. And now—I'll make a spoon or spoil a horn!"

He motioned for Eli Prosser to advance. The Mormon hesitated, pale and fearful. But his guards quickly pushed him ahead of them, standing with hands still on his shoulders when a look from their master told them he was near enough.

"Your name is Eli Prosser, I believe?" coldly demanded the despot.

The Mormon bowed, fearing to trust his tongue, just then.

"You are recently from Salt Lake City. You are a friend of Wallace Massey. You came here in pursuit of Vesta, whom Wallace claims as his daughter. You have been a suitor for her hand, and you just now declared your readiness to take her in marriage from my hands. Am I right?"

By this time the stout Mormon managed to control his tongue, beginning to believe that, after all, the cards were running his way.

"You are right. I'm not only ready, but eager, to marry her!"

"You are a Mormon, I believe?" pursued the despot, coldly.

Eli Prosser bowed assent, the frightened look returning to his eyes.

"How many wives have you at the present moment?"

Prosser shivered, hesitated. His doubts grew stronger, as his hopes waned in equal proportion.

Daddy Dead-Eye lifted his hand, and like magic a noosed rope was slipped about the throat of the trembling wretch. And in cold, harsh tones Daddy Dead-Eye repeated his question:

"How many wives have you living at this date?"

"Three, but—"

"Have you always been a Mormon? Were you born in the faith? If not, when and where did you become converted to Mormonism?"

With that blood-curdling noose about his neck, twitching at each query propounded by this mad being, Eli Prosser dared not delay his replies. Nor did he dare attempt to lie or prevaricate.

"I was not born in the faith. I was converted by a missionary after attaining a man's growth, while living in Missouri," he faltered.

"Your wives share your religious belief, of course. You say you are blessed with these, all alive and kicking," with just the ghost of a smile flitting across his scarred visage. "What did they say when you tried to add another to the list? Were they willing?"

"So far as I know," muttered Prosser, uneasily shifting his feet, secretly wondering what lay under all this inquisition.

"And they will not combine against this young lady, when you take her home? Be careful what you say," with increased sternness. "I've got to get out of this infernal hitch somehow, but I'll look for another path unless I know she'll be treated aright in the end!"

"They'll agree—or I'll know the reason why!" with a frown.

"I believe you will, and after one more question—where were you married to your first wife?"

"At home, in Missouri, just before I became a Mormon."

Daddy Dead-Eye abruptly left his stand, striding to the side of the half-unconscious maiden, gently releasing her from the arms of Roxanna Grace, despite that worthy woman's resistance. At a sign from him, one of his men took charge of the woman.

Carrying rather than leading Vesta Massey, Daddy Dead-Eye went back to his stand, and supporting her on his left arm, he made a signal that quickly brought a middle-aged man into the room, under guard. The armed men escorted him up to the table at which the Despot of Dew Drop stood in waiting, then released him, though still keeping close at hand.

"You are a lawfully appointed justice of the peace, I believe?" coldly demanded Daddy Dead-Eye.

"I am, but I don't—"

"Stick to the point, if you please, sir," was the harsh interruption. "You are empowered to perform marriages, of course?"

The frightened fellow bowed in silence. What else could he do?

"Then we stand in need of your services. If the affair looks a little irregular, don't let that trouble you. I'll take all the consequences on my own shoulders."

At a signal from the despot, Eli Prosser was brought closer, the noose being removed from his neck. The man who did this, stood with it in his hands, where the justice could not help noticing the rope. And what little courage he had left up to that moment, rapidly oozed out at the tips of his fingers.

In much the same manner, all the others present seemed awed into silence. Those who had any reasons for interfering, were powerless to use any means other than their tongues, and a single glance into the scarred face of the madman was sufficient to convince them that any such effort would be worse than useless on their part. So, in silence they remained witness to that strange bridal!

Eli Prosser stood up, pale and trembling, but showing a growing triumph in his little eyes as the despot motioned the justice to begin the ceremony. Surely all was going well! Surely he was on the point of gaining the rare prize for which he had struggled so hard and long!

In low, unsteady tones the justice began to read the questions from his book. In scarcely less firm or audible tones Eli Prosser answered whenever it was required of him, but Daddy Dead-Eye responded for the nearly unconscious maiden, his voice ringing out clear and defiant through the long apartment.

It was a hideous mockery, of course, yet it seemed terribly real to those who looked on in enforced silence.

As rapidly as he dared, without neglecting the printed forms, the justice went through with the ceremony, ending by pronouncing the pair man and wife.

In obedience to a wave of the despot's hand, he was hurried out of the room as soon as his duty was completed. Then Daddy Dead-Eye spoke up, addressing the company in general:

"I thank you for attending this harmonious wedding ceremony as witnesses, dear friends! May your own bridals prove as happy as I am

firmly convinced this will! Allow me to congratulate you, Mr. Prosser!"

Flushed, eager, triumphant, Eli Prosser returned that close grasp, then muttered something about taking charge of his sweet bride, when he was violently repulsed by Daddy Dead-Eye, who laughed mockingly:

"Wait a bit, my dear fellow! I've not filled out your certificate of marriage as yet. To be sure, that's only a form, but I'm not taking anything for granted in this charming little comedy!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

HOW THE BRIDEGROOM FARED.

THIS check, just when he felt that perfect triumph awaited him, gave Eli Prosser such a shock that had it not been for the stout arms of the two guards beside him, he would have sunk to the floor. And while supporting, they held him incapable of doing mischief should rage and desperation take the place of stupefying fear.

Daddy Dead-Eye, with the barely conscious girl lying on his left arm, made his way to where Roxanna Grace sat, speaking to her:

"After all, I fear I'm not made for playing nurse to such tender ware! Take her in charge, Mrs. Grace, and say what you can to cheer her up when you have her out of the crowd. And don't be too hard on me, by the way, for you can't always judge a dog by his first bark!"

As though glad to get rid of his burden, the Despot of Dew Drop placed Vesta in the woman's care. And Mrs. Grace, feeling that the sooner she could be gotten away from that place, the better her chances of recovering from the shock, at once started for the door.

Did Daddy Dead-Eye make another signal? Or were the two armed men acting on their own account when they took charge of both women the moment they emerged from the dining-room, escorting them up-stairs to a chamber, closing and locking the door upon them?

Daddy Dead-Eye quickly returned to his former station, where he had Eli Prosser braced up before him, already desperately trying to rally his shaken nerves and animal courage. As by instinct he knew that this scarred demon had been playing with him, much as a cat plays with a mouse before appeasing its hunger. As by instinct he knew that his triumph was turning to ashes on his lips!

There was breathless silence in the room. Everybody was waiting with intense interest for the next development. Not one had the slightest idea of what was coming, save he who engineered it all.

"Eli Prosser," harshly uttered the judge, his one eye seeming on fire as it steadied on the livid face of the recently married man. "I set you down as a thoroughbred rascal the moment my gaze rested upon you. Yet I do not pride myself greatly on my acuteness of judgment in this case, either! Only men without heart, without the slightest pretension to manhood or decency, could or would have joined in hunting down a poor, defenseless girl as you pests from Mormondom have done!"

"From the very outset I resolved to read you a lesson which none of your gang would soon forget. From the very first I have been playing with you, seemingly giving you free play to a certain extent, but in reality simply giving you slack rope enough to hang yourselves!"

"It would be no sin to hang you in reality; no sin against honor, decency or justice, for—"

"You dare not!" panted Eli Prosser, with a desperate effort to break away from his guards, his little eyes fairly protruding from their sockets, his flabby lips tingling with froth, so great was his fear.

"I dare more than your miserable brain could begin to comprehend in a thousand years!" laughed the deformed giant, then quickly bringing his risibles under command, adding coldly: "But I must not forget that this is a regular court of justice, not the bench of Judge Lynch. You shall suffer or go free on your own evidence."

"You may have forgotten, so I'll freshen your memory. You admitted that you were not born a Mormon. That you were converted to the religion of the Latter Day Saints after attaining manhood's estate. You also said that you married your first wife, now alive, in Salt Lake City, at your old home in the State of Missouri. Am I correct?"

Daddy Dead-Eye paused for an answer, but Eli Prosser had none to give him just then. And the despot shortly resumed:

"And now you have just married a young lady in the Territory of Colorado. Will you tell me what the law would say to such an act? That you have committed bigamy."

Eli Prosser groaned in utter misery. He knew that he could look for no mercy from the being who had so cunningly entrapped him. And the deep, menacing muttering which ran through the room like magic, told him he would look for help in vain elsewhere.

"Prisoner, you have been tried and found guilty. We have less sympathy for bigamists in this Territory than you might find further toward the setting sun, for women are mighty

scarce—not nearly enough to go around, counting fair; one wife to each husband. And when a hog on two legs tries to corral four—that's rushing the buck entirely too lively."

A vein of laughter ran around the room, but Daddy Dead-Eye quickly checked this, his right hand going up, his eye flashing, his face grave and hard as fate itself.

"This is no laughing matter, gentlemen. It is a serious crime, and one that deserves serious punishment. Take the criminal outside, where all Dew Drop can see how we reward law-breakers. Not by hanging; that is too sudden. Not by shooting; that wastes good cartridges which can be put to better use. But by the lash—a cur's medicine!"

Daddy Dead-Eye raised his hand, with a swift gesture. The two men who had Eli Prosser in charge, turned him about and forced him toward the door. Others came to their assistance as the fear-shivering wretch began to fight against fate, cursing, raging, screaming for aid as he was forced past his fellow Mormons.

Even had their will been of the best, neither Wallace Massey nor his companions could have lifted hand or weapon in his defense. They had long since been disarmed. They were each man guarded. And they felt that this demon of the scarred face and misshapen body, had some frightful punishment in store for them as well.

Eli Prosser was hurried out of the hotel and through the wondering, questioning, excited crowd. He was taken through the double ranks which formed in prompt obedience to the stern commands of the despot, to a point on the outskirts of the town, where a broken-topped tree offered them a natural whipping-post.

To this tree he was bound, while Daddy Dead-Eye briefly recited his crimes to the eager crowd. Then he turned to the wretched prisoner, half-dead from fear and his unavailing struggles, saying coldly:

"Be thankful that you are escaping with life, Eli Prosser. You will suffer, but not a thousandth part as severely as you made an innocent girl suffer, to say nothing of her poor mother."

"You deserve death, but that is a manly fate. Instead, you shall be striped with the cur's penalty. Lay on, executioner! Forty, save one!"

Daddy Dead-Eye fell back to the side of Wallace Massey as he uttered those final words, and there he stood throughout the horrible scene, cold and merciless, counting in clear, ringing tones the lashes as they fell with all the power of a muscular arm.

Eli Prosser never knew when the last number was pronounced. He hung a lifeless weight on the ropes which secured him to the tree. And it was to his guards that Daddy Dead-Eye spoke at the end of the whipping:

"Restore the cur to his senses. When he recovers them, give him his clothes, his arms, his horse, and set him with his face toward Mormondom. Tell him to spare no time in getting out of God's country. Tell him that if he ever shows his face in Colorado again, it will be to look upon his grave."

With a hand gripping the arm of Wallace Massey, the Despot of Dew Drop led the way back to the cabin which had at first been assigned for their accommodation. In this Link Loper and his mates were confined, but Massey was forced to accompany Daddy Dead-Eye back to the hotel, where he was turned into a small chamber, his wrists ornamented by a stout pair of handcuffs.

"What are you going to do with me, curse you?" he growled, savagely, as Daddy Dead-Eye stood before him in grim silence, his mustaches curling and twisting under the smile that showed his tigerish teeth.

"Nothing, at present," replied the despot, with sudden suavity, that was less agreeable even than his harshest tones. "Nothing, until I have firm footing—until I know what I now merely suspect."

"And that is?"

For a few moments Daddy Dead-Eye was silent. Then he added:

"You will learn all in good time. I'll simply say this much—I have sent after the woman you call your wife. If she is alive, I will have her brought here to confront you, that I may get at the bottom facts in this terribly mixed-up case. If she bears you out—if she admits that you are her husband, and the actual father of the girl—I'll set you free with ample apologies for harsh treatment, and a golden salve to cover your hurts, bodily and mental."

"But if, on the contrary, she convicts you of lying—if she proves you have attempted to deceive me in aught—say your prayers in advance, for you'll hardly have time to do a first-class job after."

Without waiting for a response, Daddy Dead-Eye turned on his heel and left the chamber, passing noiselessly along to a door before which stood several armed guards. In answer to his rap, Roxanna appeared.

"How is the young lady, Mrs. Grace? Have you told her all?"

"She's sleeping. Go 'way and leave the deary to me."

And Daddy Dead-Eye silently obeyed, without a murmur.

CHAPTER XXXV.

LARRY PINKSTON'S BONANZA.

LIGHTNING KATE was alone in her house, busily brooding over what had that day happened.

She did not look happy. There was a dark frown on her white forehead, an angry glow in her dark eyes as she leaned forward, knees supporting her elbows, with her finger-tips to her white teeth.

"What does it all mean? What is that crazy fool playing for, anyhow?" she muttered, trying in vain to penetrate the curious tangle.

She had dared so much to revenge herself on the man whom she had once so bitterly duped; whom she now hated as only a woman of her class can hate; yet of whom she still cherished a jealousy that seemed to scorch her brain and set her wild blood to boiling in her veins.

She thought to crush him before that assembly, in the eyes of the fair maiden whom she felt he loved, or was in a fair way of learning to love. Instead, she had only revealed her own shame and degradation.

"I thought all was mine when I saw him with the irons on his wrists!" she muttered, biting her nails viciously. "I thought that by one word in the ear of that hideous wretch—with one love-look into the single eye of that frightful Caliban—I could send him to death! Instead—what do I hear? That Daddy Dead-Eye has set him at liberty! That he even treats him as a friend and ally!"

She sprung to her feet, madly pacing the length of the room, a pantherish grace in her movements. He hands clinched until her sharp nails were tinged with blood from her pink palms.

A tap echoed through the door, and she paused, her face calming as by magic. One long, thrilling breath, then she spoke in even, mellow tones:

"Who is it that knocks? What is your business?"

"Nobody that a 'skeeter need git skeered of, ma'am," came a prompt response. "Jest a man critter with a message from a fri'nd, ma'am."

A frown swept across the woman's face. She did not recognize the voice, though she knew all in Dew Drop.

"What message? What friend?" she demanded, sternly.

"Call his 'nitals G. P., ma'am, an' you won't be so mighty fur out."

The answer came in a much lower tone, as though the speaker feared being heard by other ears, but Lightning Kate caught his words plainly enough. She gave a slight start. Her face turned a shade paler. She felt for a weapon, her fingers closing tightly on the jeweled haft of a dagger nestling in her bosom. For a few seconds she stood as if in doubt. Then she crossed over to the door to utter:

"If you are lying, or think to trick me, come in. If you are ready to pay the penalty, of course."

"An' ef I'm dealin' it out straight, I kin stay out?" with a half-laugh. "Ain't that rather a queerious style, ma'am?"

Lightning Kate abruptly flung open the door, a single glance by that flood of light showing her that the man was alone. And she recognized a comparatively recent comer to Dew Drop. Her visitor was none other than Larry Pinkston, now fairly on the scent of his "bonanza!"

"You say you have a message. What and where is it?"

"Snug on the tongue o' me, ma'am," meekly responded the bumner, removing his hat, and trying to smooth down his towed hair as he stole a glance into that cold, proud, beautiful face. "I don't reckon I could 'member all of it out here in the cold. An' then—waal, mebbe it ain't best to sing too loud on names, but I was cautioned fer to say my little piece whar nobody else could drop onto its meanin'. Still, ef the time ain't 'greeable, I kin go back an' tell him so!"

Larry Pinkston even turned half around, as though to put his hint into execution, when he was arrested by Lightning Kate.

"Come inside, since you are so cautious. You are hardly idiot enough to be playing a game on me. If you are—"

"I wouldn't run the head o' me into no seech trap, ma'am," with a broad grin, as he shambled past the woman into the house.

Lightning Kate closed the door behind him, then faced him with:

"You say you bring me a message from G. P. Whom do you mean by that? Speak out—and talk straight to the point!"

"G. fer George, an' P. fer Penny. I ain't no slouch of a scholar, when it comes to that, but I axed him would he mind puttin' it down on solid black an' white? He would. I didn't like to kick. So I tuck it in at one year, while t'other one was tight corked. I've held a paw over the fu'st-mentioned organ, an' I don't reckon they's much leaked out while I was gittin' this fur. Ef they hes, it's mighty funny ef I can't patch in new leather to fit snug as a new—eh?"

"Come to the point, will you?" sharply interposed the woman.

"Business in a minnit, an' I'm its prophet!"

nodded Larry Pinkston, with a complete change of tone and manner. "I'll reel it off as quick as I kin 'thout runnin' the resk o' makin' a howlin' tangle of it all."

"Fu'st, ma'am, you want to know that I sets a mighty store by George Penny, but that I thinks even a bigger heap o' my own good an' benefit. Which goes fer to mean that ef I kin make more sellin' him out then I kin by backin' him up, the longest pole gits it, fer keeps!"

Lightning Kate sunk back into a chair, a puzzled look in her eyes. She could not divine what this ragged, greasy, disreputable fellow was driving at. But she knew she could choke him off at any moment, and so she let him ramble on at his own sweet will.

"They's bin a mighty heap o' changes turned up in Dew Drop this day, ye want to keep in sight, ma'am," the bumner added, speaking rapidly, with covert glances into the cold, impassable face of the woman. "You tuck in a few, but mebbe I kin p'int out still others. An' one o' them is this:

"Vesta Massey is free o' the man who thought to make her his wife, fer of course that show wasn't nothin' more then monkeyin' fer to git him under the lash. Bein' she is free, won't George kinder look cross-eyed in her d'rection? Won't he want to try his whack at the prize?"

Lightning Kate laughed, softly, wickedly, then murmured:

"Hardly—while I'm to the fore!"

"That's plain enough. I was in the room when you set up your claim. But ef it won't hold water—what then?"

Lightning Kate stared at Larry Pinkston for a moment, open-eyed, trying to divine his meaning. Then, impatiently:

"I've no time to waste in further nonsense. You say you brought me a message from George Penny; what is it?"

"Waal, ma'am, to tell the truth, I sorter lied in sayin' that," with a faint grin, hastily adding with a deprecatory wave of his dirty hand:

"I hed to see you, you know, an' so—let me tell you jest why, Kate!"

The Faro Queen gave a start and a little exclamation of surprise at his sudden transformation. It seemed quite another man than Larry Pinkston who stood before her, speaking coldly, rapidly!

"You begin to see through it, Kate, but keep still until I am done talking: then I'll be more than happy to hear you sing! It depends wholly on you how I leave this house. It rests with you whether I go out as Larry Pinkston, the worthless bumner, or Trick Purkett, the dare-devil sport of other days!"

"You never was a fool. You always could see as far as the next one. And from your flashing eyes now, I know you've not gone blind since we parted—with a grave between us, as you firmly believed!"

"You have seen that George is rather struck with the little girl, even with your fist shaking in his face. You can guess that he'd pay me big money to hear me sing my little song for his benefit. But I'd rather be your canary for a bit—if you feed me right royally!"

Despite the steel nerves for which she was famous in Dew Drop, as in many another wild and reckless region, Lightning Kate sat like one petrified, staring round-eyed at the speaker, whose features seemed to be slowly but surely changing back into those forming a face which she had known so well in the years gone by.

"Alive—it is you, Purkett?" she finally managed to gasp, a sudden flush chasing the ghastly pallor from her face.

"Something the worse for wear, Kate, but undeniably the long-lamented Trick Purkett," softly, maliciously laughed the bumner, his bloodshot eyes glowing with mingled avarice and triumph. "Sorry to have kept you so long in mourning, my dear, but I really could not help it. Part of the time I was in a hospital. Other part I spent studying geology in a State institution. And then, of more recent days, I have been trying to get on the track of a bonanza through emptying which I might lay up drink and honey for my declining years."

"I reckon I've struck the main vein, Kate, right here in Dew Drop. I might say I have a choice of veins, for that matter. For, unless you give down, freely, I'll go to George and prove to him that you were my lawful wife when he thought he married you, and consequently he is at perfect liberty to corral the little girl whom he has taken such a red-hot fancy to. In one word, Kate, which vein shall I follow up?"

With a shrill shriek of desperate hatred and vengeance, Lightning Kate sprung upon him, striking viciously with her dagger! Hit hard, he reeled back, drawing and discharging a revolver as he fell, almost without any thought or effort at taking aim. But fate guided the lead, and with a choking cry, Lightning Kate staggered toward the door, to fall into the arms of Daddy Dead-Eye!

CHAPTER XXXVI.

IN THE PRESENCE OF DEATH.

WITH marvelous quickness and ease, the deformed giant swung the quivering form of Lightning Kate around until his own body

shielded it, at the same time drawing and covering Larry Pinkston with a pistol.

But he did not fire. There was no need of that. The bummer was sinking back on the floor, blood gushing from his neck, the avenging weapon dropping from his unnerved hand.

Daddy Dead-Eye glanced over his shoulder, to see his men standing just beyond the threshold, and he spoke rapidly:

"Two of you scatter and hunt up Matney. Fetch him here as quick as possible. The other look after this rascal. Tote him out of the way, and do what you can for him. It may be a case for the rope!"

Carefully, gently, tenderly Daddy Dead-Eye lifted the superb figure in his arms and bore her across the room to an inner chamber, where he placed the ill-fated woman on a bed. For a brief space he hesitated, gazing steadily yet with a certain degree of wistfulness into her pale face, already looking like that of a corpse.

"There may be a chance, and it'd be a burning shame for it to be lost to her through foolish squeamishness on my part!" the deformed giant muttered, barely above his breath, as he bent over the bed.

From the widening spot of blood showing through her garments, it looked as though the bummer's lead had found its way straight through Lightning Kate's heart. And Daddy Dead-Eye believed this must really have been the case as he gently, gravely inspected the wound.

There was nothing he could do save try to apply a bandage to stop or check the flow of blood. He dared not attempt to trace the course of the avenging lead. All he could do was to wait in patience for the coming of Dr. Matney.

His scarred face was very grave, his one eye filled with a sad light, as he stood by the bed, his fingers noting the fluttering pulse. Lightning Kate was still alive, though it seemed that each slow, shivering breath would turn her spirit free from its tenement of clay.

She was still living when Dr. Matney reached the house and took charge of the case. Still living when, with the rising of the sun, Daddy Dead-Eye returned to the building and sought an interview.

"The game's not nearly played out, Daddy!" Lightning Kate uttered, her dark eyes gleaming with feverish fire, her cheeks bearing twin spots of scarlet. "No one hoodoo can break my bank!"

Doctor Matney paused to whisper a few words into the ear of the deformed, then passed out of the room. Daddy Dead-Eye, his scarred face clouded and troubled, his single eye dimmed with what seemed unshed tears, silently took the vacated seat, his hairy paw gently closing on the hand which lay outside the snowy sheet.

"You look like a traveling sign for a graveyard, Daddy!" laughed the Faro Queen, but with a plainly growing anxiety in voice and eyes. "What did Doc tell you as he passed out? Honest, Daddy! Don't lie!"

"That the game was pretty nigh run out, Kate," was the grave response. "That death was all ready to call the turn, and no chance for you to slip a double!"

Her head sunk back on its pillow. A look of unutterable dread came into her eyes. She shivered like a leaf in a gust.

"It's hard enough at the best, Kate, but it might be even worse. If death had sized your pile at his first lay-down, for instance. As it is now, you've got a chance to straighten up your affairs, and leave a pretty clean record behind you. If you will, Kate!"

"Dying! And only you by my side? Where's Johnny Mack?" almost fiercely demanded the Faro Queen, her tones hard and sharp through all that shivering fit.

"Flat on his back at his room above The Alhambra. Fever set in, and he don't know anything about your hurt. Shall I fetch him here, Kate—after you've cleared up your record?"

Gently as the despot spoke, Lightning Kate seemed to find no difficulty in rightly interpreting his meaning. She must make a clean breast of all her sins, else the one man in all the world in whose love and fidelity she could trust, would not be told of her danger until all was over.

It was a bitter dose, and for a few minutes the wounded woman poured hot shot into the despot, but he listened in silence. He felt he had a duty to perform, and stubbornly stuck to the line marked out.

"After all, Kate," he said, at length, "we can get along without your say-so, if we must. Larry Pinkston will be willing enough to tell the whole story for a consideration. Or, if he croaks while I'm offering you a chance, it will only be a bit of waiting; mourning is hardly to be mentioned, under the circumstances, you know! Then—well, you heard me swear I'd fit the little lady with a husband. And I never go back on my word when I can help myself!"

Even then the victory was not won, but in the end Daddy Dead-Eye gained his point, mainly by promising to have Finger-ring Johnny brought to her bedside. And then, in pauses, in

snatches, at intervals as her remnant of strength permitted, Lightning Kate told the story of her dark and troubled past.

While yet but a girl, she had married Trick Purkett, at that time a regular "high-roller," and a prince among gamblers. For several years they lived together, getting on fairly well, all things considered, until their matrimonial sky grew clouded. One quarrel led to another, and at last, shortly after a heavy robbery, Kate shot Purkett and fled, believing she had killed him.

Instead, he was arrested for the robbery, and carefully guarded until able to leave the hospital for trial. He was sentenced for a long term of years, and taken to prison. Less than a year later, Kate read an account of his death, and after seemingly having it fully substantiated, she married George Penny.

"I loved him, then, and though I kept the story of my past a secret from him, I tried hard to make him happy, to prove a true and faithful wife. But the devil lay behind it all! We were both too hot-tempered, and neither one would own up wrong. So—well," with a short, reckless laugh, her dark eyes glittering feverishly. "You can guess the rest. But don't throw too much blame on Johnny. I was as much the tempter as the tempted. And I've never regretted my action to this day! Johnny is white—he loves me more than all the others did, and—what if he is little? What if they do say he isn't any too sharp? Not to his face, though!" with a faint, strained laugh that grew more hysterical. "Not to his face! Johnny is little, but—oh my!"

Daddy Dead-Eye stepped to the door and sounded a whistle. Doctor Matney came quickly in reponse to the signal, and with gentle force succeeded in getting the Faro Queen to swallow a soothing potion. And as soon as that hysterical fit subsided, Daddy Dead-Eye uttered:

"I've sent for Johnny to come, Kate, but if I was wrong, I can stop his getting here before you are quite ready."

"Let him come—I want him—he's the only true man I've met in all my life!" faintly uttered the woman, a soft glow coming into her cheeks, and a bright light into her dark eyes.

"It's worth while telling the truth, then, for such a reward!" the giant deformed laughed, softly.

Before Kate could answer, hurried steps echoed through the house, and Finger-ring Johnny came to the bedside, pale, agitated, trembling like a leaf. In silence Daddy Dead-Eye touched the arm of the doctor, and both men passed quietly out of the room.

"You heard all she told me, I trust?" asked Daddy Dead-Eye.

"Every word. I've got it here, written out pretty fully," was the prompt response as the physician produced a sheet of paper containing the substance of the story told by Lightning Kate.

"All that is lacking is her signature, which I reckon I can procure, by carrying out our little plot," nodded the despot, with a curious twinkle in his single eye.

Half an hour later he was standing by the bed, drying the ink on the confession with his breath. Lightning Kate, with her head supported by Finger-ring Johnny's sound arm, had made all the amends in her power.

"Good for good, Kate," laughed Daddy Dead-Eye, placing the paper in his breast as he added: "Larry meant well enough, but his lead glanced on a rib, and unless Doc lies, you'll pull through without a doubt!"

For one minute Lightning Kate stared into that scarred face, unable to realize his full meaning. Then, as she knew how thoroughly she had been duped, she burst into angry tears, moaning:

"I won't live—I want to die!—I will die! I'll never live to see him marry that doll-face! I'll finish the job myself!"

"I'll hinder it, Kate, if you say so," murmured Finger-ring Johnny. "I'll hunt him out and shoot quicker, next time!"

A hasty step was heard, and a man hurriedly whispered to Daddy Dead-Eye. The deformed turned to the bed, and gravely uttered:

"You can do better than that, John Mack. Make her your wife. Her husband has just crossed the divide!"

At his sign, the doctor and the messenger left the house. The deformed followed, leaving Finger-ring Johnny alone with his loved one.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

DADDY DEAD-EYE'S NARRATIVE.

RISE to his feet, the Despot of Dew Drop slowly glanced around the room, his eye resting for an instant on each face of the number whom he had gathered together in the dining-room where Eli Prosser had tasted of victory, only to drink deep of defeat a moment later.

Roxanna Grace was seated beside Vesta Massey, holding the trembling hands of her young friend in a kindly, reassuring grasp.

Cold, pale, stern, but looking handsomer than ever, George Penny stood at a little distance, his eyes carefully avoiding that fair young face.

Wallace Massey, his wrists freed from irons,

sat in company with Link Loper, Rank Hammond and their mates. Their faces showed how uneasy had been the hours they spent in suspense. And though the chief Mormon cast many glances into that grim, scarred face, his eyes as quickly dropped, a shiver of fear shaking his bowed frame.

At the doors and windows, armed men were standing like statues, ready to obey the slightest signal from their master.

"I have asked your attendance here, ladies and gentlemen, for the purpose of telling you a little story," coldly began Daddy Dead-Eye. "When you have followed me to the end, perhaps you will understand why I have acted in such a curious manner, of late days."

"Years ago—never mind just how many—I had a very dear friend. The same blood ran in our veins. Brothers could not have been closer to each other than we were."

"Never mind just where this friend lived. Enough that he was well supplied with this world's goods; that he had a comfortable home; that those dependent upon him lacked for nothing the heart could honestly wish for. It is enough for my purpose to say that he was a planter, on a fairly large scale, and that he lived somewhere within the borders of Tennessee."

"If this bosom friend of mind had a fault, it was that of being too trustful, too unsuspicious of his fellow beings. It was hard for him to believe evil of any man, and as for doubting those whom he loved as only a strong, honest, whole-souled man can love, he would as soon have doubted his own existence. And so it came about that he was blind to what many of his neighbors had long suspected."

"Hidden under the cloak of friendship, a human serpent came crawling into this little Eden, his foul breath poisoning all about him! And then, during one of the business trips which my friend was obliged to take, connected with his crops, this human snake completed his work."

"My friend returned home, to find it deserted, his wife and infant child were gone—had fled with his pretended friend!"

Wallace Massey gave a low, shivering cry, staring at the speaker as though a ghost had suddenly risen up before him. Daddy Dead-Eye lifted a hand, and a couple of guards glided to the chair which the Mormon occupied, their heavy hands holding him motionless, helpless.

"There was a letter on the table, which was directed by the well-known hand of his wife. He tore it open. Inside he read: that all was discovered; that she knew now how basely he had deceived her; how a true friend had given her indubitable proofs that he had a wife living when he pretended to marry her!"

"It was hours before my friend could read further. What he read then, may be briefly summed up. His wife, believing herself no wife in the eye of the law, had taken their child and started to return to her parents, abandoning him forever. She begged that he would not follow after; swearing that she would kill herself the instant she saw his still loved face!"

"One of his slaves, suspecting evil, brought a neighbor to the house. From this neighbor, my friend learned the whole truth. His false friend was a Mormon missionary, who had endeavored to obtain converts to his devilish creed in other parts, though he had never mentioned the matter while in that immediate neighborhood. He had, in company with the wife and infant, taken a boat for up-river."

"That same night another boat came in sight, bound up-river. My friend took passage, resolved to find his loved ones and clear himself in the eyes of his wife. He determined to kill the human serpent. But fate willed otherwise."

"Early in the morning, the boat exploded her boilers, hurling dead and dying wretches in every direction. Fortunately she had just left a landing, and help was promptly at hand. Among the rescued was my friend, the planter; but better for him had he been left to find oblivion in the depths of the mighty river!"

"For months he lay in a hospital, hovering on the brink of the grave. For years, after his bodily recovery, he lived in an asylum for the insane. Then, deformed, scarred in the most hideous manner, he was turned free as restored. Sent out on the world, an object of horror, of disgust, of—but why say more?" with a hard, bitter laugh as he tossed back his long hair, slowly turning around as if on a pivot that all might see his deformity.

Wallace Massey cowered lower in his chair, panting, shivering, the picture of terror. Yet he could not turn his eyes away from that terribly-marked face and figure. Some strange fascination held him bound by a spell!

"You can see what remained, ladies and gentlemen," coldly added Daddy Dead-Eye, no longer striving to maintain that thin mask. "And seeing this, remembering what else I had suffered at the hands of that devil in human shape, do you wonder that I swore to never know rest until I found him; if living, to kill, if dead, to tear his vile carcass from the grave and feed it to the swine!"

"My wife never reached her friends—her parents both died of cholera, on the very day

she fled from my home! No one could tell me aught about them, and all the clew I had was the fact of my false friend having been a Mormon.

"I started to act on that clew, but long before I reached Salt Lake, my mind gave way again. I had brief intervals of sanity, when the horrible past came back with all its old clearness, but then the black veil would come over my brain before I could take any decided steps.

"Twice I found myself in Salt Lake City, but before I could do aught, my mind gave way, and I would recover my senses far away from the pest-hole of Mormonism. And then, like a dream when one awakes, the past began to fade away until I could no longer recall it, save by broken bits, by vague glimpses, too slight to act upon.

"During my fits of madness, I came to Dew Drop, and gradually won the upper hand, just as you have seen. How, I cannot now explain. For, since my brain has cleared, all of that portion of my life grows indistinct, until it, too, seems no more than a fantastic dream!

"I cannot even tell you how I began to first suspect the truth. I only know that, as one might in a dream, I recognized Wallace Massey as a former acquaintance. I could not place him, at first. I could not tell where or when I had seen him before. But I know now! I know that he is my pretended friend of long years ago! I know he lied to my wife and won her away from me! I know that I owe all this to him! That to his devilish arts I owe my hideous face, my hump-back, my blind eye!"

For a brief space his voice choked, but then he proceeded:

"I sent out a spy to discover the woman whom he called his wife. He found her, and guided me to the place. She told me all, when I made myself known.

"She said that Wallace Massey made her believe, by forged proofs, that I had a prior wife still alive. That he promised to take her to her parents. They were dead, as word came to meet them, and while she was still undecided what to do, Wallace Massey brought her news of the destroyed steamer, with my name among the dead. And then—with his smooth, lying arts, he won her over to go with him. She said she married him, to secure a home for her child. She said that she never suspected his being a Mormon until nearly a year later.

"But why say more?" with a crooked finger pointing at the nearly senseless figure before him. "You can see for yourselves how guilty he feels himself! You can see for yourselves how he fears my vengeance!"

"Mercy! spare me! I will make amends!" huskily gasped the miserable wretch, shrinking back as far as those guarding hands would permit as Daddy Dead-Eye strode toward him.

"Ay!" in deep, harsh tones. "The same mercy you showed me!"

His hairy hands closed on his victim, holding him powerless despite his struggles, turning toward Vesta Massey, who was gazing with bewildered doubt and fear into his hard, scarred face.

"As for you, Vesta Mosier—no longer Massey!—I have given orders to have you escorted to your mother. You will find her alive, and in a fair way to recover her former strength, now that she knows there is nothing more to fear from Wallace Massey. Go to her, and—when she tells you of your father—try to pray for him!"

Without waiting for her to answer, Daddy Dead-Eye turned away, his giant grip dragging Wallace Massey after him, panting, gasping, trying to beg for mercy—trying to call for assistance!

And as the deformed dragged his victim out of the room, his armed guards kept any one from following after.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

REUNITED AT LAST.

DEEP in the mountains, nestling in a pretty valley through the middle of which ran a slender, silvery stream of water, stood a small but comfortable house, nearly concealed from inspection by the vines which clambered up each side to meet at the roof-tree.

In the door sat a woman, whose silver-threaded hair told of advancing age; whose lined face, thin, hollow cheeks, told of much sorrow and trouble in the past; past, because there was a smile upon her lips, and a look in her eyes of almost complete content.

She was watching a couple—man and girl—slowly walking up the path which wound down the valley to be lost in the distance.

The man, tall, graceful, yet of athletic build, was bending his bared head to a level with that of the maiden by his side, a smile on his lips, a love-light beaming in his cool gray eyes.

"Do you know what news I bring from Dew Drop, Vesta?" he was saying. "Do you know that I've met with a tremendous loss, only last night, little girl?"

Vesta Mosier glanced quickly up into his face, a startled look in her dark eyes. Only to droop the lustrous orbs as quickly, unable to fully meet the ardent glow which she saw there.

"Is it—have they—" she murmured, faintly.

"For sure!" tossing back his head with a light, glad laugh. "Of course I couldn't take a prominent part in the ceremony, for past reasons, but be sure my congratulations were none the less hearty when the end came. And, though I can hardly believe it myself, Kate whispered in my ear that she never in all her life had come so near to really loving me as she did then!"

Vesta frowned just a trifle, turning away her head, the action unconsciously carrying them out of the path, to slowly stroll across the sward. And George Penny could feel, though he could not see, the troubled light in her dark eyes.

A peculiar smile curled his lips, as he quietly walked on. He saw if Vesta did not, that their present course was taking them to the timber fringing the side of the valley, and that they would soon be hidden from view of that motionless figure sitting in the cabin door.

For some few minutes he maintained silence, but then he spoke, his tones grave, earnest, with just a vein of uneasiness and doubt running through his sentences:

"I hastened to tell you this, Vesta, because I thought you ought to know it at once. I have kept nothing of my past hidden from you. I have told you the entire truth. You know that I acted in good faith in marrying Kate Leclair. And, to be honest, I believe she did, also, though it afterward proved to be a mistaken belief that her real husband was dead."

"I do not blame you—for that!" murmured Vesta, slowly.

"For what, then, do you blame me?" quickly asked Penny, his face as grave as his tones were anxious.

There was no reply in words, but the maiden cast a swift, shy look upward, to droop her eyes again the next instant. But brief as that glance was, George Penny received a revelation that almost took away his breath. That sent a thrill of almost delirious joy through his veins.

With an effort he choked back the words that were trembling on his lips. He must not make another mistake. He must move warily. And yet—even as he resolved thus, he gave way to a sudden impulse. Bending his head low, he whispered:

"Shall I make a guess why, Vesta? You do not blame me for marrying Kate Leclair, you say. Do you blame me for even imagining I loved a woman before you and I met face to face? Is that it, dear?"

Vesta tried to withdraw her hands, but he would not have it so. He even stooped until she could not avoid meeting his ardent gaze. It was hard to do, knowing the light that would glow in her eyes despite her utmost efforts to veil it, but Vesta managed to accomplish the feat.

"Not that, my darling?" murmured Penny, reading the truth in her eyes. "Then—is it because I am fool enough to talk of loving and marrying another woman while I have you so near?"

Mrs. Mosier—she had long since discarded the name of Massey, after learning that she had no legal right to bear it—dreamily watched her daughter and her lover stroll away from the direct path, sighing softly as they vanished from her sight.

After all, it was better so. George Penny was a man, whatever his failings. If he had gambled for a living, so had many another good and true-hearted man.

"He loves her, and will make her happy," softly breathed the woman, and despite her age, despite her sore troubles of the past, something akin to the love-light that at that precise moment was beaming undisguised in the eyes of her daughter, came into her own worn, thin face. "She loves him, and will be happy. No human serpent will cross their pathway. No lying tongue will rob her of her dear one, as—"

She gave a start, drawing her thin figure erect, a wild, frightened light leaping into her eyes as a tall, yet bowed figure silently came around the corner of the house to pause before her.

"Minnie! Must I go back the way I came?"

It was the frightfully scarred face of Daddy Dead-Eye, the Despot of Dew Drop. It was his crooked form. It was his voice, even; but how came it to sound so sweetly, so full of mournful music?

Mrs. Mosier covered her face with her hands, shivering from crown to sole with powerful agitation. And as he saw this, Alison Mosier turned pale as death, his voice sounding faint and choking as he muttered:

"I forgot—I forgot that it is not the old Alison I bring to your eyes, Minnie. I'll never forget again. I was worse than mad to even make the effort, but I couldn't help it. I felt that I must see my wife once more, though she drove me away—"

"Not that!" gasped Mrs. Mosier, trembling still more violently. "It is the shame—the remorse—the—that demon with lying tongue!"

"That tongue is stilled forever, Minnie. And the shame was all on his side. I have never blamed you, from the moment I read that terrible letter! I knew—"

"But you can never forgive!"

For one breathless instant Alison Mosier stood as though petrified, his single eye filled with a blaze of mingling doubt and joy, as though he could not even yet bring himself to face the glad truth.

Mrs. Mosier, startled by his labored breathing, glanced up in affright, only to meet his gaze full of love far more intense than even in those happy days before the evil one stole into their Eden.

"Minnie—do you mean it?" panted the giant deformed.

"Alison—can you take me back again?"

Within the month, the two couples left Colorado forever, to make a new home in California, where none would ever learn their past.

George Penny forswore the "green cloth" for life, and made a model fruit-grower, just as he turned out to be a model husband and father. Vesta never regretted the answer she gave him with her eyes when he forced her to look up, that evening in the little grove. And if George had not been more than content with the prize he had won, he ought to have suffered a worse "blowing up" than poor Alison Mosier experienced.

As the time rolled by, news drifted to their happy home of Lightning Kate and Finger-ring Johnny. They were happy, settled down on a great stock-farm.

Link Loper, Rank Hammond and their mates after being soundly flogged and ridden out of Dew Drop on rails, vanished, no one seemed to know whither—nor to care, for that matter.

As for Wallace Massey, his name was never mentioned. Not even to George Penny did Alison Mosier ever disclose the vengeance which he meted out to his detested and detestable enemy.

His fate is one of the many wild mysteries with which the wild Western country abounds.

THE END.

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